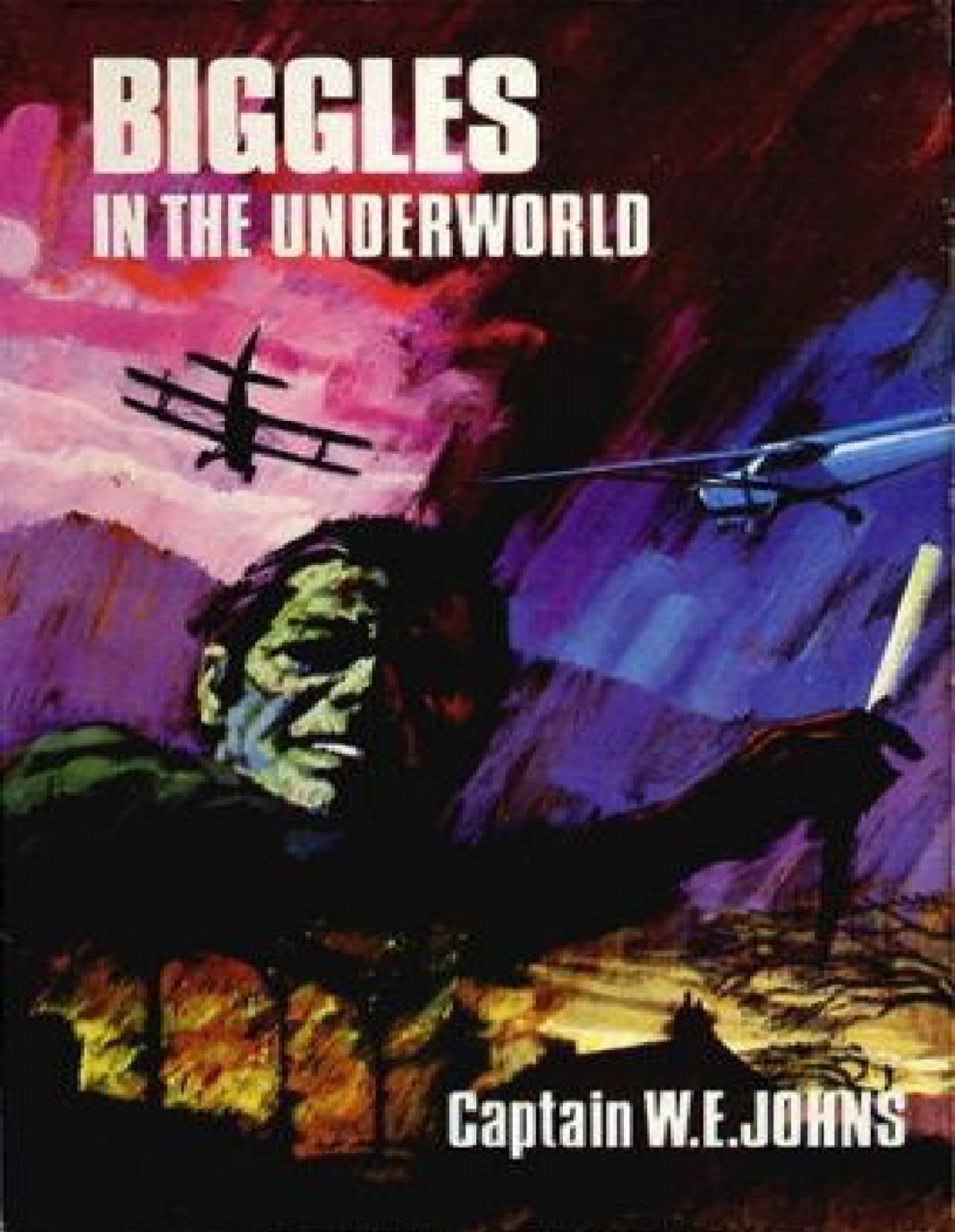


# **BIGGLES**

## **IN THE UNDERWORLD**



**Captain W.E. JOHNS**

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# CHAPTER 1

## AN UNUSUAL BRIEFING

Air Commodore Raymond, head of the Special Air Police at Scotland Yard, picked up a document that lay on his desk and placed it in front of his senior operational pilot who had just entered the room and seated himself opposite. 'Does that face mean anything to you?' he asked.

Biggles looked at a photograph, or rather, two photographs, one full face and the other profile, and observed that it was the usual police record of a man who had passed through their hands. He shook his head. 'Not a thing,' he answered. 'I can't recall ever having seen him. Nice-looking fellow. Who is he?'

A ghost of a smile flickered briefly across the Air Commodore's face. 'Yes, he's a good looker,' he agreed. 'And if you met him in certain circumstances you might think his charm of manner was in keeping with his appearance. As a matter of fact he's the most venomous little viper that ever slithered a crooked course through a civilized society. He is, or was, known to some of his associates in the underworld as Nick the Sheikh. Others called him Lazor the Razor, from his habit of carrying an old-fashioned cut-throat razor, his favourite weapon, in his breast pocket.'

'Oh, delightful,' murmured Biggles.

'We aren't sure about his real name, but there's reason to think that he was christened Nicholas Lazor,' went on the Air Commodore. 'Actually he's a British subject. He must be, as you'll understand presently, although he might be one of these queer crossbreed types that can be thrown up almost anywhere between Liverpool and the Middle East. But wherever he started life he was taught to speak English by the right people. Just the merest trace of accent that's hard to place. He also has more than his fair share of brains, and what's more, he knows how to use them.'

'Okay, sir. So this is Nick the Sheikh. What's his usual line of crookery?'

'He hasn't a usual line. He's tried everything. One might suppose he'd been educated at some college of crime, if there was such a thing, and passed out with top honours. Had he cared to go straight he could have made his mark in any line of business or profession; but apparently he's one of these men who think they get more out of life by going off the rails. They seem to find ordinary life too dull.'

'There are such people,' murmured Biggles, lighting a cigarette and studying the photograph. He saw an alert, clean-shaven face, swarthy, with smooth, shining jet-black hair brushed back without a parting. At the sides it had been allowed to grow to just below the ears in what are sometimes called 'sideboards'. In all there was something about the man that did not look truly Western European. His age might have been anything between thirty and

forty.

‘Well, what do you make of him?’ inquired the Air Commodore.

‘As you say, sir, he’s a nice-looking piece of work, but to me he’d be improved if his eyes weren’t quite so close together. I know the type. In some curious way they remind me of the cold, calculating glint you see in the eyes of a bird of prey. He looks that slick sort of charmer that women go for. If I’m any judge of the human species I’d say he fancies himself more than a little.’

‘How right you are,’ confirmed the Air Commodore.

‘What’s he done?’

‘Almost everything there is to do that’s crooked. Forgery, blackmail, safe-breaking, the lot. He speaks five or six languages, which makes it easy for him to get around. One of his accomplishments is plausibility. He seems to be able to make anybody believe anything, and that puts him in the front rank of confidence tricksters. In Australia he sold land that didn’t exist to immigrants just out from England. He’s utterly without scruple. Not one redeeming feature. He’d take pennies from a blind man’s cap.’

‘If you know so much about him why isn’t he inside?’ queried Biggles, looking surprised.

‘He *was*,’ replied the Air Commodore bitterly. ‘But he broke out of Dartmoor where he was doing a seven-year stretch for felony and causing grievous bodily harm. For once he had made a mistake. He had found lodgings with an old lady of nearly eighty who was foolish enough to keep her life savings under her bed. He had them, of course. He thought she was so infatuated with him that she wouldn’t go to the police; but he was wrong. She did.’

‘What a dirty little swine the fellow must be,’ muttered Biggles.

‘He’s all that, and more. We found him. One of our plain-clothes men, an officer named Rigby, spotted him, and was bringing him in for questioning when the Sheikh turned on him and laid his face open with his razor. There’s more than one man in London with a scar from his cheek to his chin. It’s known as the Sheikh’s initials. Watch out he doesn’t write his name on you.’

‘Let him try it,’ growled Biggles.

‘Well, we got him,’ continued the Air Commodore. ‘That was seven years ago. Two years ago he broke gaol and might have gone into outer space for all the sign we could find of him. We know now where he was hiding. You’d never guess.’

‘To save time I won’t try.’

‘In the R.A.F.’

Biggles stared. ‘You’re joking.’

‘It’s true. So he could only be a British subject or he wouldn’t have been accepted. He enlisted in the ordinary way, with forged references, of course, and turned out such a brilliant hand on aero engines that he was selected for flying training, and having got his wings was promoted to sergeant-pilot. Then, when he was warned that he was on a detachment for the Far East he

deserted — did his disappearing act. So now, with his other accomplishments, he's a pilot. Which is why I've brought you into the picture.'

'Well stiffen the crows!' breathed Biggles.

'Let me finish,' requested the Air Commodore. 'There's still some more to come. Two days ago he was spotted in London by Rigby, the officer whose face he slashed. He's retired now, but he still has a memory for faces. The Sheikh wouldn't recognize him because he has now grown a beard to hide the scar on his face. Rigby tipped us off. He says the Sheikh was immaculately dressed and obviously not short of money. Apart from anything else we'd like to know where he's getting the money.'

'Hadn't the Sheikh disguised himself in any way?'

'Rigby says no. He looked just the same; a shade older, that's all. That again would be his vanity, no doubt. He liked himself as he was, and was always meticulous about his appearance.'

'Where did Rigby see this smart little rat?'

'Walking down Park Lane. He appeared to have just come out of the Barchester Hotel.'

'What did Rigby do?'

'What *could* he do? He realized he couldn't phone us *and* trail the Sheikh. He couldn't do both. So he followed him and watched him go into a smart joint in Soho called the Icarian Club. Does the name mean anything to you? It's a private club and only members are allowed in. A big Negro keeps guard at the door.'

Biggles answered: 'I've heard of the place, but I've never been in it. As, according to the ancient Greeks, Icarus was one of the first men who tried to fly, I've always imagined that the name was intended to attract flying men, mostly civil pilots. I've never heard anything against the place except that it's a bit pricey. I'm not much for night clubs, anyway.'

'That may have been the idea, but as we've had no complaints we've had no cause to go near the place. At all events, that's where the Sheikh went. Hanging about near the door was a young chap who apparently had been waiting for him. They went in together. That's when Rigby went to a phone box and called the Yard. Inspector Gaskin dashed round with some men, but by the time he got there the Sheikh and his young friend had gone.'

'Then what?'

'Well, what could Gaskin do? To have asked questions might have done more harm than good by warning the Sheikh that he'd been spotted, in which case he wouldn't be likely to go near the place again. Hoping the club might be one of the Sheikh's regular haunts, we've kept an eye on the place ever since, but so far he hasn't shown up.'

'What about the fellow he met there?'

'We haven't seen him, either. We don't know his name, but we have a description of him. Now I must tell you something else, the real reason why I decided it was time you took a hand. About the time Rigby thought he saw the

Sheikh come out of the Barchester Hotel the pearls of a certain Lady Crantonby, worth a small fortune and normally kept in the hotel safe, disappeared from the bedroom where her maid had put them out for her to wear that night at the opera. What does that suggest to you?’

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘It suggests to me that the Sheikh had been on the job.’

‘Anything else?’

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘With the pearls in his pocket he went to the Icarian Club to hand them over to a pal, who happens to be a pilot, who was standing by to receive them and fly them out of the country. He may have flown the Sheikh out at the same time. The Sheikh would know he’d be crazy to try to sell the pearls here, so the usual problem would arise of how to get them abroad — Paris probably, as that’s the big market for pearls.’

‘Good. We’re thinking on the same lines. Anything else?’

‘One little point. Assuming he has them, the Sheikh must have known just when the pearls would be taken from the safe to Lady Crantonby’s bedroom. That wasn’t guesswork. How did he know? It looks as if he may have turned his charm on the maid and got the information from her.’

‘The possibility did not escape us. The woman has been questioned, of course, but she swears she knows nothing. She’s about forty. She’s been with her ladyship for ten years and has an unblemished record. She’s terribly upset.’

‘Naturally,’ Biggles said dryly. ‘When a woman falls for a man, particularly a woman of that age, she’ll say anything to protect him. But let’s be fair. Supposing the Sheikh has been making love to her, if he’s as plausible as you say she’d have no reason to suppose he was a crook, in which case the whole thing must have come as a shock to her. She may not have told the Sheikh when she was putting out the pearls in order that he could help himself to them. Suspecting nothing, prompted by his crafty tongue, she may have let the information he wanted slip out by accident, as it were.’

‘That’s what may have happened. While she insists she doesn’t know the Sheikh we can’t touch her. We haven’t enough evidence to arrest her even on suspicion of being an accomplice.’

‘Given time she may change her mind. If in fact she knows more than she’s prepared to tell, when she’s had time to think things over and realizes how she was led up the garden path, and that she’s never likely to see her charming boy-friend again, her affection is likely to turn to hate. Even so, that isn’t likely to help you find this slick crook, so where do we go from here?’

‘It struck me that if the chap the Sheikh met at the Icarian Club is a pilot, you might be able to get a line on him. He must almost certainly know the answers to our questions. For instance, where the Sheikh is hiding. He’s the man we want. The pearls are a secondary consideration. While he’s at large this little scoundrel is a menace.’

Biggles shrugged. ‘I’ll see what I can do, but there isn’t much to work on

and this sort of sleuthing isn't really in my line. I'll have a look round in my own way.'

'Do that. You know what the Sheikh looks like from this photograph and we have a pretty good description of his young pal of the Icarian Club. This is what Rigby says.' The Air Commodore picked up a sheet of paper.

'He's about six feet tall, fair, with flaxen hair and sandy eyelashes and conspicuously bright, pale blue eyes. When Rigby saw him he was wearing a yellow, polo-necked pullover, sports jacket and putty-coloured corduroy trousers. That's as much as I can tell you, but it should be enough. Remember, we've nothing against him — yet; but the fact that he associates with the Sheikh gives us an interest in him. Rigby didn't know him, and he knows most of the regulars by sight. He's been through our Rogues' Gallery, but he couldn't find him there, either. So it rather looks as if he isn't a professional criminal; and being seen once with the Sheikh doesn't necessarily make him one. So let's not jump to conclusions. It's just possible he's unaware of the type of man he's got himself mixed up with.'

Biggles got up. 'Okay, sir. If that's all. I'll see what I can do. From what you've told me it would be a pleasure to lay this sneaking Sheikh by the heels. I suppose he couldn't actually *be* a sheikh in his own country?'

'I think that's most unlikely. I'd say he gets his name either from the dark colour of his skin or because of his way with women. Don't forget he has another name.'

'You mean, the Razor?'

'Yes.'

'You can be sure I shall bear it in mind, sir,' were Biggles' last words as he left the room.

He made his way back to his own office where he found his police pilots waiting to hear the purpose of his interview with the Chief.

'What's the drill, old boy?' inquired Bertie Lissie.

'Ever tried looking for a needle in a haystack?' asked Biggles, seating himself at his desk.

'Never. It has always struck me as a daft way of wasting one's time.'

'Then prepare yourself, because that's what we've been asked to do.'

'What fun.' Bertie polished his monocle. 'How big is this bally haystack?'

'Pretty big.'

'About the size of London?'

'Larger.'

'England?'

'It might,' Biggles said sombrely, 'turn out to be the size of the world.'

'In that case, old boy, we shall have to find ourselves a mighty big sieve.'

'How big is the needle?' asked Algy Lacey.

'Man size. A nasty little crook known as Nick the Sheikh. Sometimes he's called Lazor the Razor from his trick of pulling a razor blade across the face of anyone who gets in his way.'

‘Charming,’ murmured Bertie. ‘I’m glad you warned me.’

‘There’s nothing funny about this,’ Biggles said seriously. ‘This little gentleman can fly aeroplanes. That’s where we come in. Now if you’ll pipe down, I’ll tell you more about it.’

Biggles repeated the briefing he had received from the Air Commodore. When he had finished there was silence for a moment. Then Algy said: ‘How do you suppose we tackle a job which could as well be done by any constable on the beat?’

‘I wouldn’t say that, although no doubt the usual routine has already been put into operation and every police officer in the country will have his eyes open for a glimpse of this little gentleman who swings a razor. In fact, that must have been going on since the Sheikh broke gaol two years ago. That he has only recently been spotted suggests he has a snug little hole in which he can lie low.’

‘Why has he suddenly come into the open?’ asked Algy.

‘Maybe he was running short of money. Maybe he feels that now the hue and cry has died down he’s been forgotten. Or perhaps he’s getting bored, or careless. I wouldn’t know. It’s this clue of the fellow he met at the Icarian Club, who may be a pilot, that has brought us into the picture. He’s the man we’ve got to find, and for that we have the organization and facilities which the ordinary copper hasn’t got. It isn’t much use standing at the street corner waiting for him to appear. We’ve got to nose round the places where such a man is most likely to be.’

‘And where’s that, old boy?’ queried Bertie.

‘I haven’t had much time to think about it, but at first sight I think our best plan would be this. For a start I shall check the Air Force List for Short Service Officers who have recently gone back to civvy street. These fellows will go on flying if they can find a way. I shall also join the Icarian Club and have a look at the members. Bertie, you can check the register of all private owners and waffle round the flying clubs for sight of this blue-eyed lad we’re looking for. Ginger, you can do the same thing round Service stations. There’s a chance he may still be a serving officer — perhaps someone the Sheikh met when he was in the service. You can also try the R.A.F. Club. Algy will keep in contact with us from here. I’m afraid this is going to be a bit of a bind, but there’s nothing else we can do — unless you have any suggestion.’

No one had, so there the matter was left.

‘Right,’ said Biggles. ‘Let’s get on with it.’



## CHAPTER 2

### A MEETING AND A WARNING

Biggles, now a member of the Icarian Club, sat in the lounge and without much interest regarded the little crowd of both sexes that lined the bar, talking loudly above the clatter of a fruit machine and 'hot' music coming over the radio. The time was 8.0 p.m. and the club was beginning to get busy.

He had been sitting there, on and off, for nearly a week, and for all the good he had done he might as well have stayed at home. This sort of establishment made no appeal to him. He knew no one and he was getting bored. He couldn't just sit there doing nothing. He was expected to have a drink occasionally for this was the purpose of the club, one of a thousand others within a mile of Piccadilly Circus, the centre of night life in London, their purpose being a meeting-place where alcoholic drinks could be had outside the usual licensing hours — at something like double the normal price, of course. To drink merely for the sake of drinking was to Biggles a waste of time and money.

As far as he had been able to observe there was nothing wrong with the place. It appeared to be what it purported to be; just that and nothing more. Nothing illegal. To his relief there was none of the noisy form of entertainment customary in so many similar establishments.

Somewhat surprisingly, he thought, he had not found it easy to become a member without the recommendation of a man already a member. It was not merely a matter of paying a subscription. He had to provide references, one of which had to associate him with aviation; so he had been right in the supposition that the place was in the nature of a flying club. On the form of application he had had to sign he simply put 'Late R.A.F.'. The tall Negro doorkeeper was strict, and no one was allowed in without being identified by him or without showing his membership card. Biggles thought this a little odd and he wondered if there was a sinister purpose behind it; but so far he had seen nothing to arouse his suspicions. But for the fact that the Sheikh had been seen there, he wouldn't have given the place a second thought.

The manager was a dark, sleek, affable little man named Constantine Nestos and known to everyone as 'Charlie'. He was not English. Biggles took him to be a Cypriot, perhaps a British subject, but he did not yet know the man well enough to ask questions, personal or otherwise.

This was his sixth successive night at the club and so far he had seen no one bearing the slightest resemblance to the 'fair, blue-eyed' young man who was really his quarry. He was not so optimistic as to hope he might see the Sheikh himself, although as he had once been to the place this was not outside the bounds of possibility. So, while he had cultivated the virtue of patience, he was beginning to wonder if it was worth while going on with the task he had

set himself, or for how much longer he could tolerate such a tiresome occupation. To make matters worse neither Bertie nor Ginger had met with any success in their investigations. The Air Commodore, at headquarters, had no further news of the Sheikh or the Park Lane pearl robbery.

Then, suddenly, the luck turned. Tired, and finding the overheated atmosphere oppressive, he was thinking of leaving when in came a man who, apart from his clothes, answered precisely to the description of the one for whom he had been waiting. He was now dressed in an ordinary dark suit for evening wear and sported an R.A.F. necktie. Actually, quite a few of these were in evidence. He went straight to the bar and ordered a drink, nodding to certain members whom apparently he knew.

Now, with an interest, Biggles came to the alert. It was for this he had been waiting; but how to proceed, how to make contact with the man, he did not know. Anticipating the situation, he had given it some thought without finding an answer. If the man was a crook, as his association with the Sheikh seemed to suggest, it would be easy to arouse his suspicions by forcing conversation on him.

His luck continued. The man he was watching was now talking to the bartender, an alert little man named Carlo, from which Biggles judged him to be one of the many Italians working in London. With his empty glass in his hand Biggles approached, ostensibly to get another drink, but actually hoping to hear the conversation; even a few words might be informative. At the moment he arrived Carlo was called to serve another customer. The man to whom he had been talking, with a full glass in his hand, turned away. The hand that held the glass came into contact with Biggles' arm, with the inevitable result that a fair amount of beer was thrown down the front of Biggles' jacket. Instantly there were apologies on both sides, each accepting responsibility.

'I'm most terribly sorry,' said the fair young man.

'Forget it,' returned Biggles. 'It's nothing.'

'Then let me buy you a drink.'

Biggles smiled. 'Well, I never say no,' he said, accepting the offer as an easy way of continuing the conversation. 'I'll join you in a beer.'

The drink was ordered and brought. 'Thanks,' acknowledged Biggles, raising his glass. 'Cheers!'

'Cheers. I see from your tie you're one of the gang,' went on the young man with his eyes on the R.A.F. tie Biggles too was wearing.

'Yes, I did a spell,' Biggles said.

'I haven't seen you here before. You a new member?'

'Yes. The name's Bigglesworth.' To save complications Biggles had more or less been forced to join the club under his own name.

His companion frowned as if searching his memory. 'That name rings a bell,' he said.

Biggles answered casually: 'I've been flying quite a while and have met a lot of people, so you may have heard my name mentioned.'

‘My name’s Caine. Brian Basil Caine. The initials, B.B.C., should be easy to remember.’

‘Pleased to meet you. You still in the Service?’

‘No. I was slung out six months ago after a Short Service Commission.’

‘Bad luck.’

‘I’m not worrying. I’ve bought a little machine of my own, so I can still put in a spot of aviating if I feel like it.’

‘Good for you. What is it?’

‘American job. Starfinder. Two-seater. You may have heard of it.’

Biggles nodded. ‘I know it. Folding wing type. But why are we standing? What’s wrong with taking the weight off our feet?’ With what satisfaction Biggles noted this information can be imagined. This was better than he had dared to hope.

Together, glasses in hand, they went to the small table, with two chairs, which Biggles had recently vacated. This gave him a moment to think. He was puzzled by the easy way Caine was talking. He was beginning to wonder if he had picked up the wrong man. ‘Where do you keep your machine?’ he asked, casually, as if it was of no importance, as they sat down.

‘I run a small farm in Hampshire,’ was the answer. ‘Not a very big place, but enough for me to handle single-handed; I have a big barn with a pasture adjacent, so what more do I want?’

‘Then you’re not a member of a flying club?’

‘No.’

‘How do you manage for petrol?’

‘No difficulty about that. I have pals.’

Biggles wondered who the pals were, but he did not voice his curiosity. ‘You’re on the official register of private owners, of course,’ he prompted, knowing he was not, or it would be on the office records.

Caine made a grimace. ‘I can’t be bothered with all that fiddle-faddle. It doesn’t mean a thing.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ returned Biggles, seriously. ‘There’s been quite a bit of funny business going on and the regulations are pretty tight. If you’re caught you may be landed with a tidy fine to pay.’

‘That wouldn’t worry me. I prefer to mind my own business. I haven’t had any trouble so far.’

As Caine was still willing to talk Biggles pursued his questioning, wondering how many drinks Caine had had to loosen his tongue to such a degree of indiscretion. Or was it mere vanity talking? ‘Do you live on your farm, then?’ he queried.

‘More or less. I have a little flat in Town for when I feel like hitting the high spots. What do you do for a living these days?’

‘Oh, this and that,’ returned Biggles inconsequentially.

Caine changed his tone of voice. ‘Not looking for a job, I suppose?’

‘What sort of job?’

‘Might be some flying in it.’

Biggles smiled. ‘I’m always open to offers. Who isn’t?’

Caine thought for a moment as if he was turning over something in his mind: or perhaps wondering if he had said too much.

‘Have another drink,’ invited Biggles, to keep the conversation going.

‘Don’t mind if I do. Make it a whisky this time.’

Biggles fetched two more drinks from the bar. He did not hurry, for he wanted time to think about this curious situation. It seemed too easy, too good to be true. He still couldn’t get Caine weighed up. Was he really as irresponsible as he appeared, talking so freely to a stranger? Or was he being clever? His behaviour was not that of a man who knew he was breaking the law. Was he a fool, or was there a trick in it somewhere? For once Biggles couldn’t make up his mind. Hoping to learn more, he took the drinks back to the table, having decided not to press his questions too hard for fear of making his companion suspicious.

‘Whereabouts is this place of yours in Hampshire?’ he inquired, as having put the drinks on the table he sat down again.

‘Near Carthanger. Hardly a village. Twotrees Farm is the name. It’s a bit difficult to find, but you must drop in some time if you’re ever that way.’

‘Thanks. I may take you up on that. Do you fly anywhere in particular?’

‘No. Just waffle around to keep my hand in.’

‘Ever go abroad?’

‘Once in a while; not very often. I may slip across the Channel to see a friend. I don’t bother with the formalities.’

‘If you’re caught at that it could cost you your ticket.’

‘I haven’t had any trouble so far.’

There was a pause while they sipped their drinks.

Biggles was wondering if Caine was the man’s real name, because if so it would be a simple matter to check his service record in the R.A.F. ‘This job you were talking about,’ he resumed.

Caine appeared to be on the point of explaining, but at this juncture there was an interruption, one that appeared to settle any doubt of Caine’s name. A club steward came up and said: ‘Excuse me, Mr Caine. You’re wanted on the phone. You can take it in the manager’s office.’

‘Shan’t be a minute,’ Caine told Biggles, and followed the steward out of the lounge.

He was away for some minutes, which gave Biggles time to ponder the information he had gathered. So far there had been no mention of the man in whom he was most interested; the Sheikh; but then, of course, there had been no reason to mention other members of the club. What was the association? The two men, Caine and the Sheikh, appeared to have little in common beyond the fact that both were pilots who had served in the R.A.F. Was that where they had met?

Caine returned and resumed his seat; but he had changed. His conversation

was no longer 'free and easy': he seemed subdued, almost taciturn, as if he had something on his mind. Biggles found himself being regarded with a different expression: not exactly hostile, but suspicious. It seemed reasonable to suppose this was the result of the telephone conversation. What had happened? Biggles would have liked very much to know who had been at the other end of the line, but Caine didn't volunteer the information and it would obviously be indiscreet, to say the least, to ask personal questions.

After the conversation had languished for a little while Caine got up saying he would have to be getting along. Then, somewhat abruptly, he departed, leaving Biggles plenty to think about. For a moment Biggles was tempted to follow him, but decided against it in case he himself was being watched. This was not entirely instinctive. He could see the manager hovering in the background for no apparent reason, occasionally glancing in his direction. A feeling came over him that he was in deeper water than was apparent from the surface.

Presently the manager came over. 'Everything all right, sir?' he inquired politely.

'No complaints, thank you,' answered Biggles cheerfully.

The manager walked on.

A little later, seeing no purpose in remaining at the club any longer, feeling well satisfied with his evening's work. Biggles, too, prepared to take his departure. He had learned quite a lot, more than he could have anticipated, and now had plenty to think about.

He was still puzzled by Caine's behaviour. Why had his attitude changed so markedly after his telephone conversation? Of course, there was no proof that he had spoken to anyone on the telephone. He may have been called away to speak to someone in person in the manager's office. The whole incident may have been an excuse to break off their conversation. It looked very much as if, in one way or another, Caine had been given a warning. Of what? Of talking too much? Had he been tipped off that the man with whom he had been chatting so confidently was in fact a Scotland Yard detective? That would account for his sudden change of manner. If that was the answer, Biggles thought, it was unfortunate. No matter. He now had quite a lot to work on.

There should be no difficulty in locating the farm at Carthanger, where Caine said he kept a private aircraft, to find out exactly what was going on there. It should also be a simple matter, from the telephone directory, to ascertain the address of Caine's flat in London. He would be on the telephone. Yes, there was plenty to work on. If Caine was as friendly with the Sheikh as it appeared, sooner or later the escaped convict could be expected to call at one address or the other.

Finishing his drink, having collected his hat and raincoat from the rack, Biggles went to the door to find himself facing a typical dreary November night: a slight drizzle of rain was falling through enough fog almost to

obscure the street lighting. The night was still young, so there was a steady stream of pedestrians on the pavement hurrying to their various destinations.

Declining the coloured doorkeeper's offer to get him a taxi, for in such conditions it might take some time, he set off in the direction of Shaftesbury Avenue where there would be a good chance of finding one. Anyway, after the rather stuffy atmosphere of the club, he felt he needed a breath of fresh air. Naturally, his mind was still occupied with what had happened inside; moreover, he was in the heart of London, so it would not be fair to accuse him of carelessness. Be that as it may, it must be admitted that he was unprepared for what was to happen before he had taken a dozen paces. There was no warning; no indication of danger.

As he passed an unlighted doorway, or it may have been a passage, an indistinct figure came sharply out of it. He sidestepped just as sharply, not because he thought he was being attacked, but simply to avoid collision. The movement was instinctive. It was a split-second glint of steel as the man's hand flashed up that told him the truth. Just as quickly he swerved, and ducked at the same time. He felt something brush his arm. Then, before he could do anything, before he had recovered from his surprise, the man was running, to disappear instantly among others on the pavement.

Biggles did not go after him, knowing that in such conditions it would be futile. He wouldn't recognize the man even if he caught up with him, which was unlikely. Muffled in an overcoat with the collar turned up, and hat pulled well down over his eyes, he hadn't so much as caught a glimpse of his assailant's face. But when he looked at the sleeve of his raincoat and saw that it had been slashed from shoulder to elbow, he was not for a moment in doubt as to the identity of the man that had done it. Lazor the Razor had lost no time in trying to put his mark on him.

Biggles now had even more to think about. For a minute, with his lips pursed, he stood with his back to a lighted shop window to consider what had happened and recover his composure, which had been somewhat shaken. It had been made clear that his suspicion of being in deeper water than was apparent on the surface had been correct; It had now been amply demonstrated. It was evident that the Sheikh had been waiting for him. It followed that he must have known he was in the club. How did he know? Assuming he hadn't been in the club himself, or if he had he must have entered secretly by a back door, someone must have told him. Who? Caine? Or Nestos, the club manager? That seemed more likely. Was this what the alleged telephone call had been about? Was this the reason for Caine's sudden change of face?

It began to look as if the club was not exactly a health resort, reflected Biggles. Anyhow, as far as he was concerned, it was time someone checked up on the amiable 'Charlie' Nestos. He might be in the records at Scotland Yard.

Resolved to be more careful in future, while the Sheikh was at large,

Biggles went on his way. It did not take him long to find a taxi and he was soon on his way home: that is, to the flat where they all lived, not the office. He found the others about to go out for the evening meal. Bertie was the first to spot the gash on the sleeve of his raincoat as he was taking it off.

‘Hello — hello,’ he bantered. ‘Bumped into a glass door or something?’

‘Nothing like it,’ Biggles answered. ‘I had a brief encounter with a gent who carries a razor where respectable citizens keep a fountain-pen.’

‘Not the Sheikh!’

‘Who else? He’s the only man I know who wears that sort of armament.’

‘Looks as if you’ll need a new coat,’ put in Ginger.

‘I nearly needed a new face,’ replied Biggles grimly. ‘It’ll be easier to buy a new coat. Don’t worry. I shall see to it that the Sheikh pays the bill. Listen.’

He narrated what had happened at the Icarian Club. ‘Now we can all get busy,’ he concluded. ‘Pass me the London telephone directory. Maybe it’ll tell us where Caine hangs his hat up when he’s in Town. It could be that the Sheikh parks himself at the same address.’

## CHAPTER 3

### ROUTINE INQUIRIES

On the morning following the affair at the Icarian Club Biggles was already in the Air Commodore's office when he arrived.

'You're bright and early,' greeted the Air Commodore as he hung up his hat. 'I gather you have news.'

'I thought, sir, you'd be interested to know that the Sheikh is still in London. Or he was last night.'

'Have you seen him?'

'Very briefly, although I must admit I didn't see his face. At the Icarian Club I had an interesting conversation with a man who I'm pretty sure was the fair-haired fellow the Sheikh met there. As I left, someone stepped out of a doorway and tried to slice up my face. All he did was ruin my raincoat. Then he bolted. Considering the circumstance, I can think of only one man with a reason to pull a razor on me.'

The Air Commodore looked serious. 'You think he had seen you talking to his boy-friend?'

'Either that or someone must have told him who I was, and what had been going on. That we had been talking.'

'Who would do that?'

'Probably Nestos, the club manager.'

'Why he?'

'As far as I know he was the only man in the club who knew who I was; or at any rate, knew me by name. I spoke to no one else.'

The Air Commodore sat at his desk. 'Tell me all about it.'

Biggles related the incident.

When he had finished the tale of his evening at the club the Air Commodore said: 'What have you done about this?'

Biggles answered. 'I've sent Bertie to locate this farm in Hampshire, where Caine claims to have an aircraft, and keep an eye on it for a little while. Ginger is watching Caine's flat in case he's still in Town. I got the address from the phone book. There was only one Caine with his initials. It's a mews flat in Kensington. Ginger phoned me to say it's a cul-de-sac. No garage. So presumably he keeps his car in a hired lock-up garage. I shall have a look at the place myself at the first opportunity. There's just a chance that the Sheikh may be hiding at the flat or the farm. If he is, and comes out, we should have him.'

The Air Commodore thought for a moment. 'Don't you think it would be a good idea if I sent some uniformed police to do a snap raid on both places?'

'No, sir,' replied Biggles emphatically. 'I don't think that would be a good idea at all.'



‘Why not?’

‘Because if it drew blank the Sheikh would know how much we know and never go near the place again.’

The Air Commodore nodded. ‘You make a point. Then what do you intend?’

‘First I shall go through the files to see if anything is known about this fellow Nestos. Then I shall try R.A.F. records for information about Caine. If, as he claims, he was in the Service, there should be no difficulty about that. He says he left on the expiration of a Short Service Commission. He may have been chucked out for some misdemeanour. Anyway, I’d get his particulars. Meanwhile, Algy is sitting on the phone in case Bertie or Ginger have anything to report. If they have he’ll let me know. I shall keep in touch.’

‘I take it you won’t go near the Icarian Club again?’

‘I don’t see why not.’

‘After what happened last night surely that would be asking for trouble!’

Biggles smiled bleakly. ‘That would be all to the good. Let them show their hand. After all, I’ve spent most of my life asking for trouble, so that would be nothing new. I shall carry on at the club as if nothing had happened. That would lead the man who attacked me to think I didn’t associate his effort with anything that had happened inside the club. If I keep away it will be realized that I think somebody in the club was involved.’

The Air Commodore shrugged. ‘Please yourself.’

‘I’ve had a warning of what can happen. If they try anything like that again I shall be ready.’

‘You don’t think we should pick up Caine and bring him in for questioning? We have a legitimate excuse. From what you tell me he’s contravening Air Traffic Regulations by operating an aircraft without being registered as a private owner.’

‘True enough, sir. But we could charge him with that any time it suited us. I’d rather catch him on the job, to find out what he’s really doing with a plane, rather than risk going off at half cock. For all we know he may not have a plane.’

‘But he told you he had one.’

‘That doesn’t mean he has one. It might be a lie. There are people who flatter their vanity by shooting their mouths about things they haven’t got. All big talk. No, sir. Before we jump on Caine I’d like to make sure he really *has* a plane. That shouldn’t take long. If it turned out he had nothing of the sort we’d look silly, having shown our hand for nothing. Somehow I have a feeling that this yarn about owning a plane might well be true, although that wouldn’t necessarily mean the machine was bought with his own money. It might be kept at the farm for somebody else, someone who can fly and needs a plane for some crooked business.’

‘The Sheikh, for instance.’

‘You read my thoughts, sir. It might be that he’s using an aircraft to fly

stolen property out of the country, and at the same time have a means of making a smart getaway in an emergency. In fact, there may be more to this illegal flying than so far we have any reason to suspect. That, sir, is the reason I suggest we resist the temptation to jump the gun until we know more about the activities of this alleged aircraft.'

'Very well,' agreed the Air Commodore. 'I'll leave it to you to handle things your own way. Always remember, though, the man we want really is the Sheikh. He's too dangerous a criminal to have floating about loose.'

'I'm not likely to forget that, sir. After what he tried to do to me last night I want him, too, for personal reasons. He owes me for a new raincoat. Now I'd better press on. I have plenty to get on with.'

'Keep me informed.'

'I'll do that, sir.'

Leaving the Air Commodore's office, Biggles first went to the Criminal Record Branch. There was no reference to a B. B. Caine. He also drew a blank at the Rogues' Gallery of photographs. He then went on to the Air Ministry. What he learned there mildly surprised him, although except in one respect Caine had apparently told the truth. He had said he left the Service on the expiration of a Short Service Commission, whereas it was now revealed that he had been retired before he had finished his time, on medical grounds, his trouble being defective vision, which had resulted in him being 'grounded' before he was discharged as medically unfit for flying duties.

Had it not been for this his commission would have probably been made permanent. Far from having a black mark against his name he appeared to have been an exceptionally good officer. His Confidential Report (which is sent in every year by a commanding officer) showed that as a flying officer he had been recommended for promotion. His character was 'exemplary'. Ability 'above the average'. He had flown several types of aircraft, including jets. He had taken, and passed out, courses on Radio and Navigation. He had done an overseas tour with 770 Squadron in Aden.

Biggles recalled, from the records he had seen on the case at the Yard, that the Sheikh had once served in the same unit. Was that, he wondered as he left the Ministry, where Caine's association with the Sheikh had begun?

What struck Biggles as most extraordinary, as he returned to his office in a taxi, was Caine's disability. Defective vision. How could that have happened? It must have come on him suddenly. His sight must have been perfect at the time of his entry into the R.A.F., or he most certainly would not have passed the searching medical examination.

Equally strange, was why had not Caine told the truth about the manner of his discharge? Why did he say he had been 'slung out', to use his own words. Defective vision was nothing to be ashamed of. It can happen to anyone. Again, with defective vision how dare he go on flying? Risking his life. For if there is one thing a pilot must have it is perfect eyesight. How could he have got a civil pilot's licence, anyway? Was this defective vision the true reason

why he had failed to apply for registration as a 'private owner'? Was he afraid of it being refused on account of his poor sight? Not that Biggles, in the club, had noticed anything wrong with his eyes. Had they been weak, short-sighted or long-sighted, surely like any sensible person, he would wear glasses.

Biggles found there was something very queer about all this; so queer that he felt there must be something wrong somewhere. He had learned a lot as a result of his inquiries, but the information had only tended to fog the picture.

All these investigations had taken a lot of time, and it was late evening, after dark, when he got back to the office to find Algy, rather bored, sitting by the telephone.

Algy reported. From Bertie, who had gone to Hampshire to locate Caine's alleged farm, there had been no word. Ginger had been on the telephone to say that Caine had left the flat, carrying a suitcase, and gone off in a car, a red Jaguar, which he had collected from a lock-up garage at the far end of the mews. It had not been possible to follow him, so he was still watching the flat, although as there was no light in any of the windows, it looked as if there was no one there. He would ring up again in about an hour for orders.

'That should be anytime now,' Biggles said.

Hardly had the words left his lips than the phone rang.

'I expect that'll be him now,' remarked Algy as he picked up the receiver. He nodded confirmation. 'What shall I tell him?'

'He can pack up and come back here,' decided Biggles. 'We'll wait. He can't stand about watching the flat all night.'

Algy conveyed the message.

'I see you've had your tea,' observed Biggles. 'You might ring the canteen for a fresh pot. I could do with a cuppa, and Ginger, too, no doubt.'

'How did you get on?' asked Algy, when he had done this.

'Fairly well,' answered Biggles. 'But it's left me guessing. When Ginger comes in I'll tell you. I don't want to go over it twice.'

A little later, almost with the tea, Ginger arrived. When they had settled down he made his report, although he had nothing to add to what he had told Algy over the phone. 'When I saw Caine come out and collect his car I was in a bit of a flap. I had left my car at the nearest available parking meter, which was a little distance away, so I couldn't get to it in time to follow him. So I carried on watching the flat. Anyway, I thought if Caine had gone to his farm Bertie would probably be about and see him arrive.'

'Did you get the number of the Jag?' asked Biggles.

'Of course.'

'Well, it's something to know his car,' Biggles said, and went on to relate what his own inquiries had produced. 'I hardly know what to make of it,' he admitted at the end. 'A lot of it sounds queer to me. Why, for instance, didn't Caine admit he'd been invalided from the Service on account of defective vision instead of saying he'd been "chucked out", to use his own words? That's a very different matter. Why deliberately try to give me a wrong

impression?’

‘Could it have been a sort of excuse for operating an unregistered aircraft?’ suggested Algy.

‘Possibly,’ conceded Biggles. ‘All I can say is, if his eyes went wrong it must have been sudden, or he’d never have been selected for flying duties. In fact, I doubt if he’d even got into the Service in the first place. There’s something strange about that. However, it gives us something to think about.’ Biggles smiled. ‘If we call ourselves detectives let’s do some detecting.’

‘You’re quite sure Caine is the man who was seen with the Sheikh by that plain-clothes officer — what was his name? — Rigby?’

‘It’d be a mighty queer coincidence if he isn’t. Everything fits. We’ll wait for Bertie to come in, or ring through on the phone, then we’ll knock off.’

They waited. Bertie did not come in. He did not telephone. Time went on. Of course, not knowing where he was they were unable to get in touch with him.

‘What the deuce can he be doing?’ muttered Biggles irritably.

‘Is there any hurry?’ asked Ginger.

‘Not really. But I thought of putting in an hour or so at the Icarian Club later this evening.’

‘I see no reason why you shouldn’t, if you feel like sticking your neck out,’ rejoined Algy. ‘We can hang on here till Bertie shows up. He shouldn’t be long now.’

‘Okay,’ Biggles agreed. ‘We’ll do that. When he comes in you can pack up and I’ll hear anything he has to say when I come home.’ He got up. ‘You’ll know where to find me if there’s anything urgent. I shan’t stay long at the club; not more than a couple of hours. I’m hoping Caine will come in. In view of what I know now I’d like another chat with him. I may be able to draw him out a bit farther. It shouldn’t be too difficult.’

‘All I can say is, the sooner we have this routine buttoned up and get on to something more interesting, the better will it suit me,’ grumbled Ginger. ‘Standing around all day in this perishing weather watching somebody’s front door isn’t my idea of an entertaining occupation.’

‘Don’t be in a hurry,’ returned Biggles. ‘Unless I’m off the beam, things’ll warm up presently. When you’ve had someone make a pass at your face with a razor you won’t find it so dull, I promise you.’

‘Mind you don’t get a repeat performance tonight,’ warned Algy, seriously. Biggles nodded. ‘I’ll watch it doesn’t happen again.’ He went out.

## CHAPTER 4

### PROBLEMS FOR BERTIE

BERTIE had started early, in one of the official police cars, a Humber, on his mission to locate, and reconnoitre as far as was possible without calling attention to himself, Caine's alleged farm in Hampshire. The word 'alleged' was still being used in connection with it because so far there was no proof that it existed.

As things turned out it was as well that he moved off immediately after breakfast, otherwise in the short November hours of daylight, he might have been compelled to return home with his mission unaccomplished. He had looked in vain for the village of Carthanger on his road map, so he had to trust to sign-posts and local information to find it; but in the event it turned out to be more difficult than he had imagined to find Twotrees Farm, his ultimate objective, the reason being it was a long way from any main road.

It was not a bad sort of day for the time of the year and as he cruised quietly through the New Forest, keeping a wary eye open for the loose ponies that are apt to wander across the road, he was content with the simple task he had been given. It gave him a day in the country instead of the murk of London.

Thinking he had plenty of time at his disposal, he stopped at a wayside inn for a leisurely lunch, and before going on his way asked the landlord if he could direct him to Carthanger. The man said he'd never heard of it.

'You're sure you don't mean Clayhanger?' he questioned.

'I was told Carthanger,' Bertie answered.

The landlord shook his head. 'There are quite a few "hangers" in this part of the world, but that's a new one to me.'<sup>1</sup>

Bertie went on his way, hurrying now, for already it was getting twilight, unaware that this confusion of names was going to give him a lot of trouble. It may be said that he never did find Carthanger, and he could only conclude that Biggles had misunderstood Caine, or Caine had deliberately misled him. Of course, there may have been a 'slip of the tongue'. At any rate, it was when Bertie found himself in a tangle of Hampshire lanes, often hemmed in by trees that had dropped their leaves to make a slippery carpet, that he realized his job was going to take longer than he had anticipated. More than once he was completely lost. However, he was not worried. Not yet.

He stopped to make inquiries as often as opportunity occurred. He spoke to a roadman, a farm labourer, and the driver of a baker's van, but none of them had heard of the village he sought. He saw nothing that could be called a village. Even houses, always cottages, were few and far between. He had not thought there was such a rural area left in the country.

It was a postman, doing his round on a bicycle, who finally put him on the

track. 'There's no Carthanger in these parts,' the man declared. 'I've lived here all my life, so if there was I'd know of it.'

'Have you heard of a farm called Twotrees?' asked Bertie, who was getting desperate.

'Oh yes, I know Twotrees,' the man replied readily. 'That's at Clayhanger. The place was empty for a while, so I don't know who's there now 'cause I haven't had to call.'

'Where is it?'

'Straight on up the hill. First turning to the left, next to the right, and from the top you'll see the house staring you in the face across a big pasture.'

'And where's the village of Clayhanger?'

'There ain't one. That's only the name of a district.'

'Thank you,' acknowledged Bertie, gratefully, and went on his way relieved that he seemed to be getting somewhere at last.

Following the postman's instructions he arrived at a spot, on the top of a hill, where the trees ended, and there, at the end of a track that ran for some little distance, stood the house, or a house, not exactly 'staring him in the face' but plain enough to see. As there was only one house in sight, there was not much possibility of mistake. It was a plain, red-brick building with sundry outhouses, such as one expects to see at a farm. Close at hand were two wind-bent elms that had probably given the place its name.

Bertie got out of his car and considered the establishment, also to look for landmarks, without which he was by no means sure he would be able to find the place again. It was at once evident that to approach any nearer without being seen by anyone there presented difficulties; for as the postman had said, between him and the farm lay a considerable area of flat grassland without a tree, a bush, or any other sort of cover. Could this be Caine's private landing ground? Bertie wondered. It looked ready made for such a purpose.

From the narrow sunken lane by which he had approached there was only one entrance to the field. A five-bar gate. It was padlocked. His immediate problem was how to turn the car in order to get away when the time came. The lane with its banks on either side, was too narrow; and he did not relish the idea of backing a quarter of a mile or more. There was no urgency about this, but he would feel happier if the car was facing in the right direction when he was ready to go. There was a possibility that he might want to leave in a hurry.

The lane continued on round a bend, so getting back in his seat he drove on hoping to come to a place where it would be possible to turn. After ploughing through ruts and greasy mud for a hundred yards, in a tricky half light, the lane ended nowhere, as the saying is. It finished in a small area of dead bracken and bleached coarse grass, flattened by the rain, which by the look of it had previously been used by vehicles as a turning place.

He turned the car, stopped the engine, and then got out to survey the scene more thoroughly. He could still see the farm standing with its two trees stark

against the sky. There was no sign of life, human or animal. That there were no people about was understandable, but it struck him as a little odd that there were no animals, horses, cows or sheep, in such a big pasture. Finding he could still see the house from the seat of his car, he got back in and prepared to watch it. He sat there for more than an hour. Nothing happened.

Wondering how to proceed, for his task he felt was far from complete, he saw that if he got behind the hedge that bounded the field to his left, and then took another that ran off from it at right angles, it would bring him close to the farm buildings, close enough to see a plane if there was one there. This was what he really wanted to know. Naturally, he was anxious not to be seen, for it would be hard to find a reasonable excuse for trespassing should he be discovered and questioned about his purpose. This, he decided, was a chance he would have to take.

It was now evening with the short November hours of daylight already closing in, conditions being made more uncomfortable by a slight drizzle that had started. He consoled himself with the thought that the reduced visibility might be to his advantage in the long run. Anyhow, leaving the car as it stood, he set off for the hedge which he hoped would take him as near the farm as would be necessary for his purpose. It meant a fairly long walk; but he didn't mind that.

In due course, without any interference, he came to the end of the hedge that brought him within a stone's throw of his final objective — the farmhouse and, scattered around a big yard, the customary outbuildings. There was still no sign of life of any sort. Judging from external appearances the place might have been unoccupied. In fact, as there was no light showing from the house, and already it must have been dark inside, the thought crossed his mind that this might be so.

Of the several outbuildings, from where he stood he could only see one large enough to house an aircraft: there was no sign of one standing in the open. This was a big Dutch barn, which as the reader probably knows is a semi-circular domed roof supported by iron uprights, the sides being left open. It is designed to protect perishable crops, hay, corn and the like. This one appeared to be filled to the top with hay, so the plane, if there was one, was evidently not there. The only other possibility was a cowshed, or stable, into which a machine with folding wings might just be squeezed.

Bertie paused to consider the situation. Not that there was much to see. Near him a gate gave access to the big field from the yard. It had been left wide open; but as there were no animals to stray this did not matter. There were some chicken houses, but as far as he could see, no chickens. This he thought was a little strange because in most farmyards there is poultry of one sort or another wandering about. Moving on a little nearer he came to a pigsty. There was no pig. Gaining confidence he moved forward to the cowshed. There was no plane in it, and what was perhaps more remarkable, no cows. He tried a stable. There was no horse. Bertie began to wonder what sort of a

farm this was. Again he paused to consider the matter.

Still thinking he walked back slowly to the big barn. He noticed wheel tracks in the muddy ground, apparently those of a car. Where was the car? He couldn't see one. And what would a car be doing in the yard, off the hard ground round the house? Where had all this hay come from, he wondered. From the big field? The hay was, he noticed, stacked in trusses. If there were no animals to feed what was the purpose of so much fodder? He walked all round the barn. The trusses nearly reached the roof. There was no way in. The hay, it appeared, was not being used; but if there were no animals to feed this was understandable.

All this time he was of course keeping a watchful eye on the house. There was still no sign of anyone moving. With twilight deepening he had expected any moment to see a light come on at one of the windows. Could it be possible there was no one in the house? There was a strange, almost uncanny, absence of sound — for a farm. This, too, struck him as curious. Unnatural.

Then, as he stood there, from somewhere at hand a gentle waft of breeze brought a familiar smell to his nostrils. There was no mistaking it. It was the smell of an aircraft. It was faint in the stronger reek of hay, and lasted only for a moment, to leave Bertie wondering if his imagination had taken charge of his senses.

An aeroplane has a unique aroma of its own, consisting of a mixture of petrol, oil, and more particularly, the sweet, sickly smell of dope; that is, the waterproof cellulose varnish sprayed on any fabric to shrink it on its frame and hold it in place. To a pilot, or anyone who has worked on aircraft, it is unmistakable and never forgotten, wherever it may be encountered.

Then, as Bertie stood there sniffing the damp atmosphere for a repetition of the smell, there came a sound that caused his nerves to twitch and sent him backing into the hay as closely as he could press his body. It was a cough. A man had coughed; or perhaps merely cleared his throat. Anyway, there was no doubt whatever about this. The sound had been close. Uncomfortably close.

Bertie held his breath, expecting to see a man come round the corner of the bam, his brain groping feverishly for an excuse for being there. No one appeared. He waited, standing rigid, for two or three minutes, and then moved silently to the end of his side of the barn. He risked a peep. There was no one there. He listened. Not a sound. There was still no light showing from the house.

What to make of all this Bertie did not know. He could have been mistaken about a plane; but beyond any shadow of a doubt there was a man somewhere in the yard. Where was he? What was he doing? The situation was becoming 'creepy'.

Then, as he stood motionless, not daring to move and completely baffled, there came another sound, even more unexpected than the first, to rattle his straining nerves. It was a tinkle of metal on metal as if someone had dropped an instrument or small tool of some sort. The extraordinary thing about this



was the sound seemed to come from somewhere behind him. He stared into the dusk. He could see no one. Not a movement.

He was thinking seriously of retiring, to get Biggles' advice on this uncanny situation, when a more natural sound brought some relief. It was prolonged and marked by moving lights. A car was coming up the track across the field to the house. He watched, but could not see much because it was now dark.

The car came on into the yard. It stopped at the back door of the house. There was a quick toot-toot on the horn, presumably to announce its arrival. The engine stopped. The lights were switched off. A man got out. The car door slammed. All Bertie could see was the vague outline of the man. He went to the door, opened it and went in, leaving it open, as was revealed when a light in the hall came on. A minute passed. The man came out again. He whistled; a particular whistle that sounded as if it might have been a recognition signal. With the light behind the man, still all Bertie could see was a silhouette.

Then Bertie was again pressing himself into the hay. There were footsteps. Another man appeared, walking towards the one still standing at the door. He appeared to have come from where he himself was standing. Bertie was amazed. Indeed, flabbergasted. Where had he come from? This, evidently, was the man who had coughed. Why hadn't he seen him before?

The man joined the one at the house. A few words were spoken. They went indoors-together. The door was closed. A light came on in the house, instantly to be doused as if a blind had been drawn.

Bertie waited, wondering if he should watch for any further developments or go home to report. He realized there was nothing really remarkable in what he had witnessed. It could happen anywhere. He decided there was one thing he could do; get the make of car and its registration number. This, moving with caution, he did. He would have liked to know what was going on in the house: if only to get a glimpse of the faces of the men inside. But this, he quickly discovered, was not possible, for the simple reason the blinds were drawn.

He retired to a safe distance to think things over. It was dark, and with the fine drizzle falling from an overcast sky conditions were far from comfortable. He thought, for all the good he could do now, he might as well go home. Nothing more was likely to happen. Yet he hesitated to leave with his mission incomplete. All he had learned was, there was no plane. There were two men in the house, but he hadn't seen enough of either to recognize them if he saw them again. Caine must have lied about owning an aircraft. Yet he couldn't shake off a feeling that he had missed something. That something queer was going on. There was mystery in the air.

He had more reason to think so when from the house came voices raised in what sounded like a furious argument. All he could do was stare, seeing nothing. Then things happened. The door of the house was flung open and a

man rushed out. For a second two figures were framed against the lighted hall. One man dashed to the car. The house door was slammed, cutting off the light. The car was started. The headlights came on. Another moment, fast gathering speed they were racing down the track in the direction of the lane.

What to make of all this, not surprisingly Bertie did not know. Unable to make sense of it he turned to go, but stopped when again the house door was opened. He glimpsed a dog being let out. It was a big dog. An Alsatian, he thought. Evidently a guard dog. It disappeared in the darkness. He did not see which way it went. The door was shut as if it was intended to leave the animal outside for some time, if not for the night.

Bertie began quickly to retire in the direction of the place where he had left his car. He had no intention of taking on the dog, in the dark, with his bare hands. As he hurried along the side of the barn, somewhere not far away behind him he heard the animal growl. Pausing to listen, he could hear the quick patter of its feet above the noise it was making in its throat. Clearly, it had winded him, or was suspicious. To run across the open field would obviously be inviting attack.

There seemed to be only one way to escape the attentions of the dog and in his desperation Bertie took it, although a moment before, in cold blood, he would have said it was attempting the impossible. He started to climb up one of the iron girders that supported the roof of the barn. In this he was helped by the fact that the hay was stacked in trusses. Had it been loose no doubt it would have pulled out in his hands. As it was he could get his fingers through the ropes of hay that held each truss together. These also sometimes offered support for his feet.

In this way, after a struggle he managed to clamber up the side of the rick, his efforts being expedited by the furious behaviour of the dog, now below him, obviously having located him.

Reaching the topmost truss, just below the roof, feeling safe Bertie paused to get his breath and find a more comfortable position in case the dog remained on guard. He also backed a little from the edge in case the noise the dog was making brought the man from the house with a torch. In doing this he felt the truss wobble as if it was insecure; but this was understandable and he thought nothing of it. But a moment later he was clutching wildly for support as it overturned and he felt himself plunging into a well of darkness. His groping hands found nothing to arrest his fall, and he crashed on solid ground. His head struck something hard and the world exploded in a cloud of stars that faded swiftly to utter blackness.

1 The Old English word 'hanger', originally '*hangra*', has many meanings, one of which is a wood on the slope of a hill. It is common in English village names.

## CHAPTER 5

### WHAT HAPPENED AT THE CLUB

It will be remembered that Biggles had announced his intention of going to the Icarian Club on the off-chance that Caine might come in. If he did, the conversation of the previous evening could be resumed, in which event Caine might do some more talking about his affairs. In a word, Biggles hoped to gather some further information from his indiscreet boasting that would open a trail to the whereabouts of the man he was really looking for; the escaped convict known in the underworld as Nick the Sheikh. Actually, Biggles thought it unlikely that Caine would come in. If, as Ginger had reported, he had left his London flat in a car, with a suitcase, it was probable he had gone to his farm in the country. If he should come in, his behaviour might indicate if he was aware of the attack made on Biggles when he left the club the previous evening.

As time drew on, and it came to nearly ten o'clock, it began to look as if Caine was not going to show up; but a little later, just as Biggles was thinking of leaving, he came in. He looked tired, Biggles thought, and worried; an impression that was to some extent confirmed by his behaviour. He went straight to the bar and ordered a double whisky. This he took at a gulp and ordered another. As he raised his glass a second time his eyes went round the room and came to rest on Biggles. He looked surprised. After a brief hesitation he came over glass in hand, and joined Biggles at his table.

'Hello,' he said. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'Why not?' inquired Biggles evenly.

'Oh, I don't know,' replied Caine awkwardly, as if he was unprepared for the question. He went on as if to explain: 'Somehow I didn't expect you to become a regular.'

Biggles smiled. 'Matter of fact, neither did I.'

'Why did you come?'

'Any reason why I shouldn't?'

'None that I know of.'

'I came hoping to see you,' informed Biggles.

Caine did not attempt to conceal his astonishment: or perhaps he couldn't. 'Why did you want to see me?'

'To finish our last conversation.'

'I don't remember.'

'You hinted you might be able to find me a flying job.'

'Did I?'

'It was your suggestion, not mine,' reminded Biggles.

Caine looked uncomfortable. 'I must have had a drink too many. Anyway, I'm afraid it's off,' he ended abruptly.

‘Sorry about that.’

‘And what I told you about owning a plane myself was a dream. I was talking through my hat. A few drinks have that effect on me.’

‘Is that so?’ murmured Biggles.

‘Yes. Not a word of truth in it. I don’t remember what I said. I must have been tight.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘Lay off the stuff if you can’t take it.’

‘By the way,’ went on Caine. ‘They tell me you run a sort of flying squad at Scotland Yard.’

‘That’s right. Who told you?’

‘A friend of mine happened to mention it.’

‘Was that because he saw you talking to me?’

‘Possibly.’

‘In view of what you told me about breaking Air Traffic Regulations, that must have got you worried,’ Biggles suggested banteringly.

‘Not in the least,’ declared Caine. ‘It was all bunkum.’

‘Weren’t you afraid I might run you in?’

‘No. I’ve nothing to fear.’

‘I’m glad to hear it.’

‘You must have a dangerous job,’ Caine said. ‘Always poking your nose into other people’s business.’

Biggles smiled. ‘I’ve been doing a dangerous job ever since I left school. It keeps me from getting old too fast. That’s one of the reasons why I’m here. I have a feeling this could be a dangerous place.’

‘For whom?’

‘For me. Perhaps for you. When I left here last night after talking to you a fellow in the street tried to knife me. Does that surprise you?’ Biggles spoke with his eyes on Caine’s face.

Caine did not answer the question. He drank some of his whisky. ‘In that case why did you come back here tonight?’

‘I thought you might have heard about it,’ Biggles said casually.

‘Not a word.’

‘I merely mentioned it to show you what can happen in this part of London on a dark night.’

‘Thanks. But nothing like that is likely to happen to me.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure.’

‘No one has any reason to pull a knife on me.’

‘You never know. You might wake up one morning to find yourself with only half a face.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘Take it how you like. I’m dangerous company.’

Caine was looking strained. ‘Have another drink,’ he suggested.

‘No thanks. I’ve had my quota.’

Caine fetched himself another large whisky from the bar.

Biggles went on, 'I've told you why I came back tonight. Why did you come back?'

'No particular reason.'

'Let's put it this way. Who told you to come back?'

'No one. Why should you think anyone told me?'

'Let's say I was guessing. I thought maybe you'd spoken to someone after you'd left Town.'

Caine stared, frowning. 'Have you been spying on me?'

'Part of my job is to spy on people, if you care to put it like that. In the world today a lot of people spend a lot of their time spying on a lot of people. At the moment we're both being spied on.'

'What! By whom?' Caine looked startled.

'Our mutual friend Charlie Nestos hasn't taken his eyes off us since you came in. I wonder who he's most interested in, you or me? If there's a dictaphone near us, and that wouldn't surprise me, someone should find our conversation interesting.'

'It must be you he's watching,' Caine said. 'He can't have any interest in me.'

'As I said before, I wouldn't bet on it,' returned Biggles dryly.

'What gives you that idea?'

'It wasn't long last night before it was known to someone you were here, talking to me; and as I've already remarked, I'm dangerous company.'

'Just what are you getting at?' demanded Caine, trenchantly.

'I've told you what happened to me last night.'

'You're not suggesting I had anything to do with that!'

'Of course not. Anyway, not wittingly.'

'I'm still not with you,' retorted Caine.

'Then let's see if we can get on the same wavelength,' Biggles said, pleasantly. 'Shall we put it like this? As one flying man to another, and speaking as a man who has had more experience of the world than you have, I think you would be well advised to choose your friends more carefully.'

'Hell's bells! Are you telling me how I should pick my friends?'

'I'm merely reminding you there are some nasty people about.'

'I know what I'm doing.'

'Do you? In that case you must realize you're heading for trouble.'

'You think you know a heck of a lot,' Caine said, a sneer creeping into his voice.

'More than you imagine. I'm a detective, remember? It's my business to know things. But don't get me wrong. I don't go about trying to make trouble. There are occasions when I try to prevent people from getting into trouble.'

'And that, you flatter yourself, is what you're doing now.'

'Exactly.'

'Well, you're wasting your time. I can take care of myself.'

'That's what you think. I presume to doubt it. Still, okay if that's the way

you want it. If you should change your mind let me know. My address is in the phone book. I needn't waste any more of your time, or my own.' Biggles finished his drink and stood up ready for departure.

'Just a minute,' Caine said, looking as if he had lost some of his confidence.

'Well?'

'Just now you said you knew more about me than I imagined. What, for instance? You've done a lot of talking. Now prove it.'

Biggles looked mildly surprised. 'Do you really mean that?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. I know you're associating with a time-serving crook who's wanted by the police. If you're caught with him it'll be up the steps<sup>1</sup> for you at the same time.'

Caine's tongue flicked over his lips. 'It isn't true.'

'Are you asking me to believe you didn't know?'

'I don't know what you're talking about.'

'Fair enough. Then there's nothing more to be said,' returned Biggles conclusively.

'Why are you telling me this?' inquired Caine curiously.

Biggles hesitated. 'I really don't know. There was no need for me to tell you anything. Perhaps it was to find out if you know what you're, doing. You've just answered that question for me. Unless you're a better liar than I take you to be, apparently you don't realize the risks you're taking. That's about all. I shall be sorry to see a man with your record end up serving a life sentence.'

'I'm not a crook.'

'If you aren't then you must be a fool, which, in view of your qualifications I find hard to believe.'

'What record are you talking about?'

'Your Service record, of course.'

'So you've seen that, too,' Caine said bitterly.

'Naturally. Where did you meet Lazor?'

'I don't know anyone of that name.' Caine's hesitation in answering the question was not missed by Biggles.

'Perhaps you know him as Nick. Nick the Sheikh!'

'I've never heard of such a person.'

'Okay, Caine,' Biggles said sadly. 'Have it your way. But when you find yourself with nothing on the clock,<sup>2</sup> don't say I didn't do my best to warn you.' He walked away.

Collecting his hat from the rack he went into the street. He did not use the pavement except to cross it to the far side of the road. There he stood under a lamp until a cruising taxi came along. He took it and went straight home.

'Well, was he there?' asked Algy, when he walked in.

'He was,' answered Biggles. 'We had quite a natter.'

‘Get anything out of him?’

‘Not much. Frankly, I still don’t know what to make of him. I still can’t believe he’s really a bad hat. If he isn’t, he’s a fool and I told him so. Where’s Bertie?’

‘We haven’t seen him.’

‘What?’ Biggles looked astonished. ‘Hasn’t he rung up to say where he is and what he’s doing?’

‘Not a sign, not a word.’

‘I don’t like the sound of that,’ Biggles said seriously. ‘He must have run into trouble. Still, there’s still time for him to get in touch, somehow. We’ll give him a little longer. I’ll have a bite of food. Then, if we’ve still heard nothing we shall have to do something about it.’

‘Such as?’

Biggles shrugged. ‘There’s only one place to look for him. At least we know where he was going.’

They went, two at a time, always to leave someone minding the telephone, to the convenient little restaurant round the corner which they so often used, for a quick meal. When, at the end of this necessary operation, and they were all together again over an hour later, there had still been no word from Bertie.

‘Something must have gone wrong,’ Biggles stated. ‘Even if he’d broken down, or been involved in a road accident, Bertie would have found a way of getting in touch with us before this. If he ran foul of this razor-slashing thug anything could have happened. That’s what worries me. Anyone else wouldn’t matter. I’m going down to find out what’s happened.’

‘Why you?’ asked Ginger. ‘You’ve been on the trot all day. All I’ve done is stand on one leg then the other.’

‘I’m all right.’

‘You may need help,’ prompted Ginger.

‘Does that mean you want to come with me?’

‘Not particularly, but I think you should have someone with you.’

‘Okay, if that’s how you feel. We’ll go down together.’ Biggles turned to Algy. ‘You keep an ear to the phone. I’ll call you from somewhere on the road to check if Bertie’s come in or been through. If he has, leave a message on the pad and go to bed. Come on, Ginger. Let’s get mobile.’

Said Algy earnestly. ‘I know the Chief is against us carrying guns, but if I were you, with a razor expert in the offing. I’d put a pistol in my pocket.’

‘I was thinking the same thing,’ returned Biggles, with a smile that had little humour in it.

A few minutes later they were on their way.

1 ‘Up the steps’ — crook jargon for the Central Criminal Court.

2 An R.A.F. expression signifying out of control and instruments registering zero.

## CHAPTER 6

### A SHOCKING DISCOVERY

Biggles had the same difficulty in finding the village that was his objective as had Bertie earlier in the day. It was late, therefore, when he had the good luck to be put on the right road, or lane as it turned out to be, for Twotrees Farm. The informant was a solitary pedestrian apparently taking his dog, a suspicious-looking lurcher, for a walk. His manner was gruff to the point of being rude, but at least he obliged with the necessary information.

‘What’s the matter with him?’ Ginger said as they drove on. ‘What’s he doing out at this time o’ night, anyway?’

‘If you’re asking me to make a guess, I’d say he was a poacher looking for his Sunday dinner. In fact, from the bulge under that heavy coat he was wearing he may have already got it. The dog, the traditional poacher’s dog, still had a pheasant feather sticking to the corner of its mouth. But that’s nothing to do with us. Keep your eyes on the road. Driving on a night like this is tricky enough even when you’re on familiar ground.’

‘Straight on up the hill and you can’t miss it, that fellow said,’ reminded Ginger.

A few minutes later, on the slope of a narrow tree-lined lane, with Biggles driving slowly and with the care conditions demanded, his caution was demonstrably justified in no uncertain manner by an incident that gave them both a fright.

It began when somewhere ahead the lights of an approaching car illuminated the trees to give them the artificial appearance of a stage set. Dipping his own lights Biggles dropped his speed to a crawl, for there would obviously not be much room to pass. It was as well that he did so, for an instant later, with its headlights blinding, the car flashed round a corner at a speed that would have been highly dangerous in broad daylight. Any sane driver, seeing a car in front of him, would have braked hard and crept past. But not this one. Ginger was so sure a collision was inevitable that instinctively he lifted his knees to his chin, as he would have done in a crashing aircraft, to prevent his legs from being trapped in the wreckage.

Biggles must have thought the same, for he stood on everything and jerked to a stop that threw them forward against the windscreen. As the other car tore past there could not have been an inch between the two vehicles.

‘The fool,’ Ginger blurted wrathfully when he could get his breath. ‘He ought to be shot.’

‘The crazy idiot,’ grated Biggles between his teeth. ‘He’ll kill somebody presently. With lunatics like that on the road it’s not surprising the accident figures are what they are. Did you see the car? When it first appeared I thought it might be Bertie.’



‘I didn’t see much of it but it certainly wasn’t Bertie,’ stated Ginger. ‘It was too low on the ground. I’d say a sports car. Probably a Jaguar.’

‘Not in any circumstances could I imagine Bertie driving like that; he’s not that daft,’ declared Biggles, turning up his lights and driving on.

‘What was the fool trying to do An R.A.F. expression signifying out of control and instruments registering zero. break through the sound barrier?’

‘One thing is quite certain; he must have been in a devil of a hurry to get somewhere. Let’s hope we don’t meet any more like him.’

They crawled on up the lane, always uphill. ‘They say it’s a long lane that has no turning, but it’s about time we came to the end of this one,’ remarked Biggles after a while.

‘Stop,’ snapped Ginger suddenly.

Biggles stopped. ‘I’ve got to stop anyway. We seem to have come to a dead end.’

‘There’s a car.’

‘Where?’

‘Behind us. We’ve just passed it.’

‘I didn’t see it.’

‘It’s facing the other way, with no lights. Tucked into the bracken and stuff.’

Biggles cut his engine and switched off the lights. As they got out and walked a few yards back to the other car, he remarked casually: ‘Good place to dump an old car to get rid of it.’ Then with a change of tone he went on quickly: ‘No, by thunder! It looks like...’

‘It’s Bertie’s car,’ Ginger said.

‘Then he must still be here; or he can’t be far away.’ Biggles opened the door of the car and looked inside. ‘He isn’t here, anyway,’ he went on with a hint of relief in his voice. ‘According to that poacher fellow, Twotrees Farm should be somewhere about here.’

‘That must be it.’ Ginger pointed to the vague silhouette of a house on the skyline beyond an open field. Close by it two leafless trees stood stiff and stark.

‘Not a light anywhere,’ Ginger said, as they took a few steps forward to a wire fence. There was a gate. It was wide open. Close by it a pole carrying wires was conspicuous.

‘They must have electric light,’ added Ginger.

‘More likely the telephone,’ observed Biggles. ‘There may be nobody in the house. Or, of course, anyone there could have gone to bed. It’s getting late, and there are still people in the country who go to bed early. I would have expected to see cattle, or stock of some sort, in a field this size; but I don’t see any.’

‘What can Bertie be doing?’

‘Your guess is as good as mine.’

‘Queer he should stay here as long as this without letting us know what he

was doing.'

'Perhaps he couldn't.'

Ginger looked up sharply. 'You think he's in trouble?'

'It seems more than likely. His car tells us he can't be far away - unless for some reason he couldn't get back to it. We'd better have a look round.'

'Does that mean you're going up to the house?'

'If necessary. If Bertie should come back here while we're away he'll see our car and know we're on the spot. Bring the torch from the car so that we can see what we're doing. We don't want to barge into a bull. Don't forget this is a farm, so that possibility is always on the boards.'

Ginger collected the heavy torch, rubber-coated to protect the bulb from vibration, and without switching it on handed it to Biggles. They went through the field gate and set off up the cart track that obviously led to the farmhouse. The rain had stopped, but the sky was heavy with cloud, with no moon and only an occasional star blinking through a gap in the overcast.

They were drawing near to the house when a warning growl a little way in front of them brought them to a halt.

'So there's a dog,' muttered Biggles irritably. 'That's awkward.'

Presently in front of them they saw it through the gloom. It stood firm, growling, bristling, as if to bar their progress. Biggles tried to coax it. It was no use. He shouted. 'Anyone at home there?'

No answer came from the house.

He tried again. 'Hi there. Will you call your dog off?'

There was no reply.

Said Biggles, grimly: 'I hate hurting a dog when it's doing its job; but sometimes with this breed a tough line works when kind words fail.' As he finished speaking he advanced quickly on the dog with one arm raised. The dog retreated, still growling deep in its throat. Then it turned, and showing its teeth, sprang. Biggles sidestepped and swinging the heavy torch he carried hit it on the nose. The animal let out a yelp of pain, and making a peculiar noise, shaking its head, backed away. Biggles advanced. The dog retreated.

'That was taking a chance,' accused Ginger.

'I caught it on its tender spot, its nose. It takes a tough breed to stand that. Don't ever try it on a bulldog.'

They walked on, the dog retreating in front of them.

Said Ginger, in some surprise: 'Are you going to the house?'

'I am.'

'What excuse will you give?'

'If we're asked for one I shall say we've broken down and ask if I may use the phone.'

As they rounded the end of the house to reach the back they saw reflected light. It was coming from an open door. They walked up to it. The light came from a lamp in a short hall with a door at the far end.

Said Biggles, 'Apparently there's someone at home after all.' He knocked

on the back door. When no one answered he called loudly: 'Anyone in?'

There was no reply.

Biggles walked forward to the door at the far end of the hall. He knocked, waited a moment and said: 'May I come in?'

No answer was forthcoming. He looked at Ginger and shrugged. Then he opened the door, pushing it wide open. He took a step forward. Only one. Then he stopped dead, staring. Ginger did not have to look long to see why he had stopped.

Biggles' hand went to his pocket and came out holding his automatic. 'Watch out!' he breathed. 'There's been murder done here.' His eyes flashed round the room. They explored the floor.

To Ginger there was ample reason to suspect murder. There was blood everywhere. It had even splattered on the table and the remains of a half-eaten meal, also a half-empty bottle of champagne. Light was provided by an old-fashioned oil lamp. A kettle on an open coal fire spurted steam as it rapidly boiled itself dry. A chair had been knocked over.

Biggles strode to another door and, pistol at the ready, flung it open. It was the kitchen. There was no one there. Returning, he stooped and touched some blood on the floor with a finger and looked at it. 'This happened within the last hour,' he said tersely. His eyes, frowning, turned on Ginger. 'The question is, where's the man who did it?'

'Upstairs?'

'I'll see. Stand fast.' Biggles went up the stairs by the usual staircase in the hall. Ginger, standing tense with his back to the wall, heard him moving about. Presently he came down. 'No one,' he said. 'But there was certainly somebody here not many minutes ago. Unless all this mess was the result of an accident there must have been two people. Where have they gone?'

'They may have bolted when you shouted about the dog.'

'Could be.'

'You don't think Bertie...'

'If he was mixed up in this mess one would think he'd still be here.'

Biggles pointed. 'It looks as if this is where the first blow was struck, causing the blood to fly. If the weapon was a cosh, or something of that sort, there must have been more than one blow. The first doesn't splash blood. It's the second, in the same place, that does the splashing. The injured man went this way.' Biggles followed the trail of blood down the hall to the door by which they had entered the house. 'He walked or ran,' he went on. 'I mean, he wasn't dragged, or the blood would be smeared.' Outside the door the torch revealed more bloodstains; but there the trail ended. Biggles spoke slowly, as if trying to work out the problem. 'There was trouble in the house. Blows were struck. Someone was shot, or knifed. A stab would cause more blood than a shot. The person hurt came as far as this. No farther. So what happened?'

'His body might have been carried somewhere?'

‘But the man was bleeding like a stuck pig. There’d still be a trail of blood. No. That isn’t the answer. I’d say there was some sort of vehicle, probably a car, standing here. The injured man got into it — or was put in it. The car then went off. Any more blood would be in it.’

‘Could it have been the car that nearly rammed us coming up the hill?’

‘Possibly. In fact, very likely. It was the only car we saw and it came from this direction. Perhaps that was why it was in such a hell of a hurry.’

‘I thought it was a Jag. Caine had a Jag,’ said Ginger.

Biggles thought for a moment. ‘You make a good point, there. But I saw Caine at the club. I didn’t see him leave, so I don’t know where he went; but he would have had plenty of time to get here. What time did you say it was when you saw him leave the flat and go off in the car?’

‘About four o’clock.’

‘Bertie must have been here then. Wait a minute. Let’s try to work this out. It’s a matter of timing. Where did Caine go between four and the time he came into the club? That must have been getting on for eight. You say he had a suitcase. He wouldn’t be likely to take a suitcase to the club. Why bring his car? It would have been easier to take a taxi, or a bus.’

‘I reckoned he was coming here.’

‘That’s what I would have thought. He may have come here to the farm. He would have had time to do that and then go back to the club. Let’s suppose he came here. He must have intended to stay. He would hardly have come all this way had he known he was later going to the club. Why did he go back to London?’

‘Because of something that happened here.’

‘Good. That’s reasonable. There was somebody here, somebody who sent him back to London; somebody who drinks champagne. There’s something queer about that. It suggests this is no ordinary farm. I’d wager you could go, into thousands of farms in this country without finding a bottle of champagne put on the table for evening meal. But never mind that. It’s a detail. Let’s go on. We were saying Caine came here when he left his flat. Then, for some reason he went back to London. If it was his car we saw on the hill, then after leaving the club he must have come back here. This is where the time factor gets a bit tighter.’

‘But he could have done it.’

‘Yes, he could. All right. He came back. Then something must have happened to cause this mess. It’s not much use trying to guess what that was.’

‘But what about Bertie?’ questioned Ginger. ‘How does he fit into this? He must have been about, or his car wouldn’t still be here. That’s what worries me.’

‘It worries me, too. Of course, something may have happened to cause him to abandon his car and try to get home by some other method.’

‘In which case he’d have taken the first opportunity to get in touch. He may have done that by now.’

‘If the telephone in the living-room is still working we can soon settle that,’ Biggles said, returning to the living-room and picking up the instrument, indicating with a nod to Ginger that it was in order. There was no dial, so he gave the operator the number of the flat. Algy answered. Biggles put a straightforward question. Had there been any word of Bertie?

The answer was ‘no’.

Biggles went on. ‘Listen, Algy. I’m speaking from Twotrees Farm. We’ve found Bertie’s car, but no Bertie. There’s nobody here. Something’s happened. We don’t know what, but from the blood over everything it looks like murder. Get the Yard to check all hospitals within twenty miles of Winchester to find out if a badly injured man has been brought in; probably suffering from knife wounds. While you’re at it you might put out a general call to pick up a sports car, probably a Jaguar, with bloodstains on the floor. That’s all for now. I can’t say when we shall be back. We may be some time.’ Biggles hung up. ‘Now we’d better start looking for Bertie,’ he told Ginger in a brittle voice. ‘I’m not leaving here without him. I don’t think he can be far away.’

They found the dog waiting outside the door. Biggles ordered it firmly into the house, pointing the way. The dog, after a moment’s hesitation, evidently having been taught obedience, obeyed, taking up what may have been its usual place. Biggles closed the door, shutting it in, and walked towards the nearest outbuildings. ‘We’d better not make a noise,’ he said. ‘There may be someone else not far away.’

‘You mean — the man responsible for the mess in the house?’

‘Of course.’

There were not many buildings to search. They found nothing of interest in any one of them. As Biggles came out of a stable, having left Ginger on guard outside, Ginger laid a restraining hand on his arm. ‘Hold hard a minute,’ he said. ‘Stand still.’

‘What is it?’

‘I could have sworn I heard voices.’

They listened for a minute; then, hearing nothing, they walked on. They moved slowly, nerves alert. They came to the big barn.

‘There it is again,’ breathed Ginger.

‘Where?’

‘It seemed to come from here.’ Ginger touched the hay.

Biggles looked up at the towering mass. ‘That’s impossible. How could it?’

Ginger shrugged. ‘Search me.’

They made a complete circuit of the barn, returning to their original position without finding the solution to the mystery.

‘I don’t get it,’ Biggles said.

‘Listen.’

Again, unmistakably, came the muffled murmur of human voices.

Again looking up at the stack Biggles said: ‘There’s something phoney

about this. I'm going to have a look. Give me a leg up. Hold this.' He handed Ginger the torch.

## CHAPTER 7

### WHAT BECAME OF BERTIE

For how long Bertie remained unconscious — stunned would perhaps be a better word — he had no means of knowing; but it could not have been for very long. He recovered his senses slowly, in darkness as black as the inside of a cave, and it took him some minutes to remember what had happened. Slowly it all came back. Only then did he realize where he was.

It dawned on him that the haystack must be hollow; a dummy; and he had fallen into the middle of it. He had no idea of the time. He could see absolutely nothing. He had a petrol lighter in his pocket, but he was afraid to use it for fear of setting fire to the hay. He seemed to be half smothered by the stuff. In fact, his first really conscious sensation was of an overwhelming reek of hay. And not only hay. There were other, even more familiar, smells. Petrol. Oil. Aeroplane dope. Clearly there was an aircraft near at hand. He had been right when he thought he had caught a whiff of one when he was standing outside the barn.

It did not take him long to ascertain that he was not seriously hurt. He had banged his head on something. He could feel a bump on his forehead, but it was not particularly painful. The skin was not broken.

With some care, for the first movement made him a little giddy, he got to his feet and shook himself free from loose hay. He was careful because he was afraid of bringing more trusses down on top of him, perhaps enough to smother him. For, as he knew, a truss of hay is a fair weight. Cautiously he groped in the darkness. His hands came into contact with something solid. Or nearly solid. It was smooth, and had such a familiar feel about it that he thought he should know what it was. Then, as his hands followed it along, the penny dropped — as the saying is. It was the wing of an aeroplane; a wing folded back along the side of the fuselage.

He drew a deep breath. So that was it. Being where it was, at the address Caine had given, the machine must be his. So he had told the truth after all, Bertie thought. He *did* own an aircraft. This was what Biggles had sent him to check. It was what he had been looking for. But why had it been so cunningly concealed? For that this was so was obvious. The barn had not been used merely as a hangar. It was a hiding-place. And a clever one. No one would suspect it was there. He would never have guessed it. There was something sinister about that. Caine had even had the nerve to tell Biggles where he lived, knowing that there was small chance of his suspecting there was a small plane on the premises.

However, Bertie did not stand long pondering the matter. Now that he knew what he had been sent to find out, he decided, the thing was to get home with the information which, by a curious accident, the dog had put in his way.

Had he not been forced to climb the haystack to escape its attentions, he would never have suspected the truth. Indeed, he would almost certainly have gone home with a false report, convinced that there was no aeroplane at the farm. All was now plain.

The immediate problem was how to get out of the place. He felt for the inside of the wall of hay, for that was what it was, and found it. With only his sense of touch to guide him he groped his way round, hoping, and at first expecting, to find an exit, or some sort of device that would provide the necessary opening through the mass of hay. Then, of course, he remembered there wasn't one, or he would have found it from the outside, when he had walked all round the barn. But that, he told himself, was ridiculous. If an aircraft had been brought in there must obviously be a way out. Moreover, as he realized now, there had been a man inside, recently. He had heard him cough. And drop something. Probably a tool. How did he get in and out? Whatever he had been doing he would not be working in the dark. There must be some sort of lighting, somewhere. Yet Bertie, to his chagrin, had earlier made a complete tour of the barn without finding anything like a door or a light. And now he knew he had been all round the walled-in space when he came to, and nearly fell over, the truss of hay that had deposited him where he was.

He thought of trying to tear a way through the walls that hemmed him in. Hay was flimsy stuff, or so he thought until he discovered that when compressed, into trusses, with the weight of more trusses on top of it, it was anything but soft. He desisted when he realized he was in some danger of bringing tons of the stuff down on top of him. Again he felt for his petrol lighter to see what he was doing, but still he hesitated to flick it on, aware that one spark might set the place ablaze with him inside and no way out. To be burnt alive, as he most certainly would be, was not the way he would have chosen to make his exit from the world.

He tried climbing up the wall of hay hoping to get out as he had come in; over the top. But the bales wobbled dangerously, apparently simply being balanced one on top of another, so that while the bands that held each truss as a single unit offered a handhold, there was an obvious risk of the entire wall collapsing on top of him, crushing or smothering him to death under its weight.

The smell of the stuff, in the enclosed space, was suffocating as it was.

What still puzzled him was this. How was the plane taken in and out? It seemed ridiculous to suppose that one end of the rick, or a complete side, was taken down every time the machine was needed, and rebuilt again afterwards. He felt sure there must be some arrangement to allow for this. Another point struck him. The engine would never be started inside the stack. No one but a madman would do that knowing that sparks or hot gas from the exhaust might set the place on fire. No. When it was required the plane would be manhandled out, probably to the big field, before the engine was switched on.



One man alone would not be able to do that. At least two men would be necessary. Who were the men? Caine would be one, no doubt. And the other? The Sheikh? Why not? They had been seen together.

Twice Bertie groped his way all round the inside of his strange prison without finding what he sought. There appeared to be no loose place, or an area that felt more flimsy than the rest; but again he was afraid to push too hard for fear of bringing the whole mass down on top of him. He could find no sort of latch. It began to look as if he would have to wait until daylight for release. The wall did not quite reach to the roof, as he had discovered when making his accidental entrance. When the sun came up a certain amount of daylight would penetrate over the top, enough to enable him to see what he was doing, he thought.

True, this would mean a long and tiresome waste of time; but at least it was a safe way, he told himself. After all, he was in no desperate hurry. It wouldn't really matter if he didn't get back home until the following day. No doubt Biggles would wonder what had detained him, but that could be explained in due course. Oddly, perhaps, it did not occur to him that anyone might come into the place before morning.

At all events, having decided what to do he felt his way to the nose of the machine and squatted on an undercarriage wheel. Many a time he had used an undercarriage wheel for a seat, but never in such peculiar circumstances as there, he reflected whimsically. Silence reigned.

After a while, finding his position not as comfortable as he could have wished, he had a better idea. A seat in the cockpit promised an easier way of spending the night. Without much difficulty he changed his position and settled down to have a nap as the most agreeable way of passing the time.

He was well on the way to doing this when he was brought to attention by the sound of running footsteps, close outside. Then came a noise. A fairly considerable noise, of brushing, as if the hay was being moved. This was outside his calculations and he sat up the better to see what was happening. A moment later he was nearly blinded when a light came on; a single but powerful electric bulb depending from above.

The man who had switched it on stood there, breathing heavily, as if he had been running. How he had got in Bertie could not imagine. There was still no sign of a door, or an opening in the hay, although obviously there must have been one, if only small, or the man could not have got in. He walked up to the plane, with what object Bertie never knew, for when he came level with the cockpit, and stopped as if he intended to get in, inevitably he saw it was already occupied. Not surprisingly, his lips parted in astonishment. Bertie, on his part, as the light fell on the man's face, recognized him instantly from the photograph Biggles had shown him.

It was Nick the Sheikh.

After groping for words for a moment the Sheikh burst out: 'Who the hell are you and how did you get in here?' In the circumstances it was a perfectly

natural question.

Bertie adjusted his monocle. 'Matter of fact I fell in,' he stated with a smile. 'And having fallen in I couldn't get out. Wherefore, I need hardly say, I'm delighted to see you. Where's the door?'

'What do you mean — you *fell* in?' inquired the Sheikh tersely.

'I was chased by a bally dog and shinned up what I took to be a haystack to save a lump being taken out of my leg. In the dark I went over the top and landed here. How was I to know the confounded stack was hollow?'

'What were you doing when the dog found you?' asked the Sheikh icily.

'I was on my way to a house I could see,' Bertie answered readily.

'Why?' snapped the Sheikh.

'To ask if I could use the phone to get some help with my car, which had decided not to go any farther.'

'Get out!'

'With pleasure,' agreed Bertie. 'I've been here quite long enough. I don't think you have any cause to get upset. I haven't done any damage as far as I know. Not that I could see much in the dark — if you get my meaning. If that bad-tempered hound belongs to you—'

'Cut the cackle and get out.'

'Okay, okay, I'm on my way.' Bertie climbed down. He was not particularly alarmed, thinking he had this advantage. He knew the man, but the Sheikh did not know him, so could not suspect his real purpose in coming to the farm. Having got down, he turned to find himself looking into the muzzle of an automatic pistol.

'Oh here, I say, what's all this about?' he protested.

'You'll find out.'

'Be careful what you're doing with that gun,' Bertie said seriously. 'It might go off, in which case it might start a bonfire of no small dimensions — with us inside it — if you see what I mean.'

'Get over against the wall.'

'Very well, if you say so,' agreed Bertie who, being unarmed, was in no position to argue. He walked to the wall indicated, where the Sheikh tapped his pockets presumably to check that he did not carry a weapon.

'Now let's have the truth,' said the Sheikh grimly. 'Who sent you here and for what purpose?'

Bertie feigned astonishment. 'Sent me? I've told you—'

'You heard me.'

'Why on earth should anyone send me round climbing haystacks on a night like this?'

'Don't argue with me,' snarled the Sheikh. 'Answer my question. Or else.' With a quick movement he put the gun in his pocket and produced a razor, flicking open the blade, which he held a few inches from Bertie's face. 'Now talk,' he said through his teeth.

'What about?' inquired Bertie.

For an instant he thought he had gone too far, for the Sheikh's face flushed with anger and it looked as if he was really going to strike. 'Talk,' he hissed. 'You can't fool me. Who sent you here? Quick, or by the time I've finished with you your own mother won't know you.'

Bertie perceived he was in a tight spot and it may have sharpened his wits. He had an idea; one that would give the man confronting him something to think about and in that way delay the final issue. 'All right,' he said. 'If you must know it was a fellow named Caine.' Which, indirectly, was true.

The Sheikh stared. He looked amazed. 'Caine told you to come here?' he exclaimed incredulously.

'Well, he didn't exactly tell me,' Bertie admitted. 'He gave me a sort of open invitation to look in if ever I was this way. He said he lived at a place called Twotrees Farm, so seeing the trees I thought this must be it.'

'You're lying.'

'If I'm lying how did I know he lived here — assuming he does?'

'Where did you meet Caine?'

'At a club in London. A place called the Icarian. You may have heard of it. Anything else you want to know?'

'I've never seen you there.'

'I've never seen you there, if it comes to that.'

'Don't try getting smart with me,' grated the Sheikh viciously, holding up the razor as if he really intended to strike.

How the clash would have ended is a matter for surmise, but at this critical juncture there came an interruption. A voice spoke; a voice hard and brittle with authority. 'Stand back, Lazor, or I'll drop you cold!'

Bertie recognized Biggles' voice. His eyes turned up in the direction whence it came and he saw Biggles' face, on top of the hay, looking down at them. The Sheikh looked up, too. There was a moment of frozen silence, without movement, like a motion picture that has been cut. Then it sprang to life.

Biggles came sliding down the inside of the wall to land on the truss that had been the cause of Bertie's downfall. He fell, but was on his feet again in an instant. Quick as he had been, the Sheikh had moved as fast. He darted to the spot at which he had entered the place. Just what he did there Bertie could not see, but an aperture appeared; a small doorway; apparently an accommodation door, it was nothing like large enough to allow the plane to go through. He did not stop to close it, but after firing a random shot from his gun, sending a stream of sparks in the general direction of Bertie, he disappeared into the outer darkness.

Biggles ran up to Bertie saying, 'Which way did he go?'

Bertie pointed to the doorway. 'Out.'

Biggles shouted: 'Watch the outside, Ginger,' and ran on to the door.

Bertie followed closely.

## CHAPTER 8

### PAUSE FOR SPECULATION

When Biggles and Bertie reached the open door they were confronted by an outside world of deep night. It was pitch-dark. They could see nothing.

‘We’ve lost him,’ muttered Biggles. ‘He could have gone anywhere. I’ve made a mess of it.’

‘Not as far as I’m concerned, old boy,’ Bertie said warmly. ‘You arrived in what they call the nick of time. Much obliged and all that.’

‘Forget it.’ Biggles took a few steps forward.

‘Careful,’ warned Bertie. ‘The blighter’s got a gun, don’t forget.’

A beam of light appeared round the end of the stack. It was followed by Ginger. ‘What goes on?’

‘He’s got away.’

‘Who?’

‘The Sheikh. I suppose you didn’t see which way he went?’

‘I didn’t see anything.’

‘Could he have gone to the house?’ Bertie said.

‘Not a hope. That’s the last place he’d make for knowing he’d be trapped inside.’

‘He may have made a dash across the field to find my car.’

‘Did he know you had a car?’

‘I told him,’ Bertie had to admit.

‘Why?’

‘I had to explain how I got here. I’ll tell you about that later, when we have time to talk.’

‘We saw your car. We left ours at the same place.’

‘We’d better go across,’ Ginger said. ‘We’d look a bright lot of Charlies if we found ourselves stuck here without transport.’

‘You’re right.’ Biggles started off across the field.

They had not taken twenty paces when from the far side of the field came the sound of a car being started up. Its lights came on. They moved down the lane.

‘There he goes,’ Biggles said bitterly. ‘The Chief will take a dim view of this when I have to tell him how we let him slip through our fingers.’

‘What about the phone in the house?’ reminded Ginger. ‘We know it’s working.’

‘What about it?’

‘We could put out a general call for the car to be stopped. He couldn’t get far.’

‘Unless he’s a bigger fool than I take him to be, he won’t try to get far in a police car,’ returned Biggles tersely. ‘Anyhow, we don’t know which one he’s

taken. We'd better find out. I only hope he hasn't interfered with the one he's left. If he has we're in for a nice long walk — what the...?' He spun round as from behind them came a sudden sound of crackling.

For a moment nobody spoke. Words were unnecessary. From the inside of the dummy haystack, through billowing smoke, came the orange glow of fire.

'A lovely finish to a brilliant night's work,' observed Biggles with biting sarcasm.

'Hadn't we better do something about it?' said Ginger urgently.

'Do what?'

'Phone the fire-brigade, for instance.'

'Before it could get here the place would be a heap of ashes. There's nothing we can do about it. It'll have to burn. That's all there is to it. After what's happened the Sheikh wouldn't be likely to come back here, you can bet your sweet life on that.'

'What about the plane?' Bertie sounded shocked at the idea of leaving it to destruction.

'I wouldn't go into that inferno for any plane — not even my own,' stated Biggles vehemently.

'What could have started the fire?' Ginger said wonderingly. 'Was somebody smoking?'

'The Sheikh fired a shot as he bolted,' Bertie said. 'That must have done it. I saw sparks. I told the fool not to use a gun in there with all that loose hay about. He realized the danger, too. That was why he switched to his razor.'

'Let's congratulate ourselves that we got out when we did,' Biggles said grimly. He went on: 'And now, as far as I can see we might as well go home and forget about it.'

'Before we start there's one thing we ought to do and that's ring Algy to let him know we've found Bertie and we're on our way,' Ginger suggested. 'He might as well pack up and go to bed instead of spending the rest of the night sitting by the phone.'

'Yes, we could do that,' Biggles agreed without enthusiasm. 'We'd better confirm before we do that we still have a car. Ginger, you might slip across to make sure one of the cars is still there. You've got the torch. We'll wait here.'

'Okay.' Ginger departed at a trot.

While he was away Bertie gave Biggles a quick and concise account of his night's work. 'I'm pretty certain it was Caine who came here and went off again,' he concluded.

'In that case we may have seen him on the road,' returned Biggles. 'He, or some lunatic, nearly collided with us.'

'If the plane really belonged to him he's going to be sick when he comes back and learns what's happened to it.'

'He may not come back.'

'Why not?'

'Because at the first opportunity the Sheikh will get in touch to tell him to

keep clear. At least, it seems to me that Caine is more likely to spend the night in London, where he has a flat, than come all the way back here. Of course, there may have been somebody else here about whom we know nothing.' Biggles told Bertie of the bloodstains, about which of course he was quite ignorant. 'That's a mystery we still have to solve,' he said.

'The Sheikh may be making for Caine's flat now,' surmised Bertie.

'I doubt it. He's bound to have realized by now that Caine did too much careless talking at the Icarian Club. How else could we have known about this place? No. It's my guess that the Sheikh will keep clear of Caine for a while. Goodness only knows where he'll go. He may have another hideout, and that could be anywhere.'

'One thing's certain, old boy, he won't use *this* plane to make a getaway abroad.' Bertie said comfortingly. 'There can't be much of it left by now.'

The rick was now a glowing pile of embers.

Ginger came running back. 'Okay,' he said. 'He's taken Bertie's car. Ours is all right. I tried it.'

'Fine. Then we can nip into the house and phone Algy.'

'Watch out for the dog,' reminded Ginger as they walked briskly to the farmhouse.

Actually, the dog seemed thoroughly scared, and did not move from its position on the far side of the room. It may have been the smell of blood that had upset it. Some dogs react that way; it seems to frighten them. As for Bertie, when he saw the mess — for the first time, of course — he whistled softly through pursed lips. 'Oh I say,' he murmured. 'What have some naughty boys been up to here?'

'That's what I'd like to know,' Biggles said, going straight to the telephone. He was to know the answer sooner than he expected. Within minutes, in fact.

He put through the call to Algy. 'Biggles, here,' he said when the call was answered. 'This is simply to let you know we've found Bertie. He's all right. We're bringing him home right away. What's that? *What* did you say?'

Then followed a long period during which the others could only guess what Algy was saying, for of course they could not hear him; but they were able to judge from Biggles' expression that there was news; indeed, startling news. Then Biggles broke in with: 'Can you give me the number? Good. Just a tick while I make a note of it.' He wrote something on the back of an envelope which he took from his pocket. Then he said: 'As we're not far away we shall go on there, although at this hour of night we may have difficulty in getting in. If we do we shan't be back for some time, so you'll have to expect us when you see us. Okay. Let's leave it like that. So long.' He hung up.

'What was all that in aid of?' inquired Bertie.

'Tighten your safety belts,' Biggles answered. 'You're not going to believe this. Algy put out the call I suggested for a wounded man and a bloodstained car. The car has been found. It's outside the cottage hospital at Repford, not

far from here. It's a Jag. It belongs to Caine. He's inside with a six-inch gap in his face. Or he had. It's just been sewn up. Needed twenty stitches. He says it was an accident. He slipped and fell on a carving knife he had in his hand. He can tell that to the marines. We know better.'

'Sounds like the Sheikh's been busy with his razor,' Bertie said dryly.

'Of course. What else? Carving knife my foot. I'm not wearing that.'

'I heard voices raised in the house as if two men were having a row,' informed Bertie.

'Strewth!' exclaimed Ginger. 'If that was Caine's Jag that nearly knocked us for six as we came up the hill, it's no wonder he was in a hurry.'

'I begin to see a glimmer of light,' stated Bertie. 'This fits with what I saw when I was watching the house. After the row inside one of the men dashed out and went off like a bat out of hell. That must have been Caine's second visit. I'd say, as you thought, that when Caine left the flat in Town he came here. Then he went back again to London.'

'That's when he must have come to the club,' surmised Biggles.

'Why come here, then go back?' queried Ginger.

'I can only think he came here to see the Sheikh,' Biggles said. 'It looks as if the Sheikh sent him back to Town — to the club, in fact. Why? He must have had some object. Just a minute. I think I've got it. He sent him back to the club to look for me. I'd make a guess at the reason. He sent him to find me in order to say what he had told me about having a farm, and a plane, was all rot. That, in fact, is what he did say. I wondered at the time why he had changed his tune. He went out of his way to make me believe that what he had previously told me was a lot of nonsense. He'd had a drink too many and had been blowing through his hat.'

'How did the Sheikh know what Caine had told you?' questioned Ginger.

'Caine may have been fool enough to tell him. In my own experience he's a careless talker. There's no doubt the Sheikh knew he was talking to me last night. If he didn't see us together himself, then Nestos, the club manager, may have told him. I saw him watching us. I've had a feeling all along that somehow he came into the picture.'

'It begins to add up,' put in Ginger. 'Let's say the Sheikh sent Caine back to undo the mischief he'd done by talking too much. He was to say it was all a lot of hooley. Then what?'

Bertie came in again. 'Having done what he'd been ordered to do, Caine came back here. I saw him. At least, I thought I saw him, although as it was dark I couldn't swear to that. But this still doesn't explain why the Sheikh should go for him with a razor.'

'You make a point there,' Biggles thought for a few seconds. 'I've got it. Or I could make a guess at the reason for that. I did some plain speaking to Caine at the club. Feeling he might not know the sort of man he was associating with, I as good as told him he was a crook. My idea was, in the first place, to give him a chance to break it off. Secondly, I thought after he'd

done that he might come clean and talk.' Biggles shrugged a shoulder. 'Of course, if he was daft enough to repeat what I said, when he came back here, and challenged the Sheikh to his face, so to speak — and he was quite likely to do that — I can imagine the Sheikh losing his temper. There may have been a fight in which the Sheikh went for his razor and Caine got the sharp edge of it. When Caine realized what had happened, his natural reaction would be to get his face seen to before he bled to death. When he got to a doctor he'd have to account for being in such a mess, hence the carving knife story. But this is largely guesswork. I shall try to see Caine right away, although if he's been on the operating table the hospital may object. They won't be pleased at having a visitor at this hour of night. However, it's worth trying. Caine may now be willing to talk, and so give us an idea of where he might look for the Sheikh. Easy on your oars while I phone the hospital to find out if they'll let us see Caine. Algy has given me the number. It's no use going there if they won't let me in. It'll have to wait till tomorrow. But the place isn't far away and there's no point in sweating all the way back to London if we can carry on while we're practically on the spot. I'll see.' Biggles picked up the telephone and put through the call to the hospital.

When a duty nurse answered, having said who he was, he asked to speak to the Night Sister. Presently he was talking to her. After listening for a minute or two he said: 'Very well, Sister. Thank you,' and hung up. Turning to the others he went on: 'Nothing doing. She says we'd better leave it until tomorrow. We wouldn't get much out of him tonight. He's very weak, nearly having died from loss of blood. They only saved him with blood transfusions. Now he's been given a sedative to keep him quiet; which means he'll be half doped. Apparently he arrived in a highly excitable state from shock, which I can well understand. So that's it. We shall have to wait.'

As they walked to the door Biggles continued: 'Tomorrow he may be fit enough to make a statement, so perhaps it's better this way. When he's had time to think, and realizes I gave him a fair warning, he may be ready to tell us the truth about what's been going on here, and maybe come across with all he knows about the poisonous little viper who stung him. Let's get along. We shall feel better tomorrow ourselves after we've had some sleep. It's been a long day.'

'What about the local police?' queried Ginger. 'Isn't it time they were told about this? They'll be sore if they think we tried to keep this business to ourselves.'

'Tomorrow will do for that. After I've seen the Air Commodore. He can tell 'em. Then they can have a look at Twotrees Farm and make what they can of it. I wish 'em joy. I may want to have another look at the place myself, in daylight. Someone will have to take care of the dog, anyway, pretty soon. We can't just leave the poor brute to starve. Let's press on home. I'm tired.'



## CHAPTER 9

### A SLENDER CLUE?

The morning following the dramatic events at Twotrees Farm saw Biggles in the private office of his Chief, waiting to report and ask for instructions in respect of the local police in whose county they had been operating. They were entitled to an explanation. (Later it was learned that they had found the car in which the Sheikh had made his getaway less than five miles from the scene of the fire.)

When the Air Commodore, had listened to all Biggles had to say his only remark was: 'So you lost him. Pity.' He was referring of course to the Sheikh.

'I'm afraid so, sir,' answered Biggles sadly. 'Short of shooting him I couldn't stop him. Had I known for certain that he was at the farm I would have tackled the business differently. The man I expected to find at the farm was Caine. Apparently they were both there.'

'What are you going to do now?'

'The first thing, I think, is to go to the cottage hospital at Repford to see if Caine is well enough to talk. He may tell us what happened at the farm last night and perhaps give us a clue as to where the Sheikh may have gone. Until we get a line to work on we shan't get far. After what's happened I can't imagine the Sheikh going back to the farm; nor is he likely to go to Caine's flat here in London. Maybe it's as well that the plane, which was kept hidden at the farm, was burnt out. He may have been hoping to use it to make a dash to the Continent.'

'How about the club? Would he go there? We could organize a quick raid.'

Biggles shook his head. 'Knowing what he knows now, that's the last place he's likely to head for.'

'All right. I'll leave it to you,' said the Air Commodore. 'You go and have a word with Caine and see what you can get out of him. You might find him willing to talk. When you've done that you might go back to the farm to see if you can pick up anything there. By the time you get there you'll probably find the local police in charge. They'll have to be told what you were doing there. I'll have a word with the Divisional Inspector and put him in the picture.'

'How much will you tell him — so that I'll know how much he knows?'

'I shall merely say we had a tip-off that the Sheikh, on the run from Dartmoor, might be there.'

'Okay, sir.'

Biggles left the room, and returning to his own office selected Bertie to go with him, first to the hospital at Repford and then on to the farm, about which, as a result of his overnight reconnaissance, he knew more than any of them. They were soon on their way, and mid-morning found them at the hospital asking after the condition of the man who they hoped would be able to assist

them in their inquiries — to use the customary expression.

They were told Caine was now fully conscious and out of danger, although still weak and suffering from shock. The house doctor, in view of who they were, agreed to allow them to see his patient, but asked them not to get him excited nor to stay for very long. 'He'll get over it, but of course he'll be scarred for life,' he concluded.

'Is the wound consistent with what he said about falling on a carving knife?' asked Biggles.

'Since you ask me, it looks more as if he intended to cut his throat with a razor and lost his nerve,' returned the doctor, with grim humour. 'It was a clean gash.' He then took them to the private room in which Caine had been found a bed. 'Not too long,' he requested softly as he left them. 'What with the stitches and bandages he may find it difficult to do much talking.'

They found Caine propped up in bed with pillows. He looked dreadful, not that much could be seen of his face for bandages. However, his eyes flashed recognition.

'Hello, Caine,' began Biggles cheerfully, taking a chair beside the bed. 'I thought I'd look in to see how you were getting on. I shan't worry you to talk much if it hurts.'

Caine's lips moved. 'So you — managed to — find me!'

'That wasn't very difficult.'

'You know what happened?'

'I can guess. We were at the farm last night shortly after you left. In fact, Bertie Lissie here, one of my chaps, was watching the farm when you came out in a hurry. I was coming up the hill in a car. I imagine it was you who nearly knocked me off the road.'

Caine nodded. 'Sorry. Couldn't stop. Did you — get him?'

'If you mean Nick Lazor, no. When he found himself trapped in the barn he set fire to it and bolted. The whole thing went up in flames — and of course, the plane went with it. Did it belong to you — or him?'

'It was — mine.'

'Too bad. But as I told you at the club, people who hob-nob with crooks usually get the dirty end of the stick at the finish.'

'All right. You needn't — rub it in.'

'Was the plane insured?'

'No.'

'Bad luck. What about this so-called farm? Who does that belong to?'

'Me. That is, it's in my name. It was — Lazor's suggestion. He said he could show me how to make some easy money.'

'What made him turn on you?'

'I told him what you said. That he was a crook. He didn't like it. Lost his temper.'

Biggles nodded. 'I thought it might be something like that.'

'Why does he carry — that ghastly — weapon?'

Biggles smiled wanly. 'There are different theories about that. Some say it's to mark anyone who lets him down so that the underworld will know the victim isn't to be trusted. The scar is known to crooks as Nick's mark. Personally I think it's a form of vanity. He thinks it's smart. It's the oriental streak in him coming out. The point is, how do you feel about him now you know what sort of a rat he really is?'

'I'll kill the little swine for what he's done to me — after all I did for him.'

'That won't do you any good. You'd do better to let us deal with him.

What exactly *did* you do for him?'

'Ran errands for him — to France.'

'That was naughty of you. I take it you were paid?'

'Yes. But I really only did it for the fun of it. I have some money of my own — not much, but enough.'

'Dangerous sort of fun, Caine,' Biggles said reprovingly. 'You knew he was a crook.'

'Yes, but I didn't think he was really bad.'

'Well, now you know. Other people have made the same mistake. All I can say is you're well shot of him. How did you come to meet him?'

'First in Aden. He joined my squadron there. Then we met at the club he owns in Soho.'

'You mean — he owns the Icarian Club?'

'So he told me.'

'And Nestos, the manager, is a friend of his?'

'Of course.'

'Does Lazor live at the club?'

'I don't think so, although I believe he has stayed there.'

'Where does he live?'

'I don't know. He has never told me. It was one day at the club I told him I had a plane. The next day he came to see me with a scheme, and I must admit I fell for it; chiefly, I think, because I liked him. He can be very persuasive.'

'Other people have discovered that. A smooth tongue is his chief stock-in-trade. But let's get down to brass tacks. Did he tell you he was a gaol-breaker on the run and the police were looking for him?'

'No.'

'Do you know about a valuable pearl necklace that was stolen recently from the Barchester Hotel in London?'

'No. I had nothing to do with that. This is the first I've heard of it. You think Lazor pinched it?'

'We've reason to think so.' Seeing that Caine was beginning to look exhausted under this questioning, Biggles went on: 'We'd better be going. You can't help us by giving us an idea of where Lazor might have gone?'

Caine thought for a moment. 'Now he knows you're on his track he might have gone abroad.'

'How?'

‘By air. I’m not the only man he knows who has a plane.’

‘Indeed! How do you know that?’

‘One day not long ago a fellow landed on my private patch at Twotrees Farm. He brought Lazor down.’

‘What was this chap’s name?’

‘I don’t know. He didn’t stay long and we weren’t introduced. Lazor simply referred to him as Tommy.’

‘What was the machine?’

‘One of the early type Moths.’

‘Did you notice the registration?’

‘No. I only saw the machine at a distance.’

‘You said just now that when you saw Lazor at the club he put up a proposition to you. What was it?’

Caine was about to answer when the door opened and the doctor came in. ‘Sorry, but that must be enough for now,’ he said shortly. Looking at the man in the bed he went on: ‘He shouldn’t be talking at all until his wound heals. Give him a few more days and he can talk as much as he likes.’

‘How long is he likely to be here, doctor?’ asked Biggles, rising.

‘A week at least. Perhaps longer. It depends on how well the wound heals, and we can take the stitches out.’

‘Just one last question. Where will you go, Caine, when you leave here? I shall want to know where I can find you.’

‘I shall have to think about it. Probably to the flat.’

‘I see. Okay. I’ll see you again when you’re better.’

‘So you’re not going to arrest me?’

Biggles smiled. ‘Not yet, anyway. What happens will depend on how you behave yourself. So long.’

After they had left the hospital Biggles said to Bertie: ‘We didn’t get much out of him, but I think he told us as much as he knows. At all events, I think he’s now in the mood to co-operate.’

‘I should think so, too, after what the Sheikh has done to him,’ returned Bertie, grimly. ‘Where now?’

‘We’ll press on to the farm. I don’t expect we shall learn much there, but one never knows.’

Half an hour later they were at Twotrees Farm. Biggles drove straight up the drive to the house. He was not surprised to see a police car outside the back door and the door open. Inside were two uniformed police officers, an inspector and a sergeant. They looked askance at Biggles and Bertie when they entered. ‘Who are you?’ the inspector wanted to know.

‘We’re from Scotland Yard,’ informed Biggles, introducing himself and Bertie. ‘Don’t let us disturb you. When I left my Chief this morning he said he’d be getting in touch with you. We merely wanted to have a look round. Do you mind?’

‘Help yourself. I don’t think you’ll find much here. How much do you

know about this?’

‘Quite a bit. Matter of fact we weren’t far away when it happened.’

‘What were you doing here?’

‘We had a tip-off that Lazor, alias Nick the Sheikh, who got away from Dartmoor two years ago, might be here.’

‘Was he?’

‘Yes.’

‘What happened?’

‘He got away.’

‘You should have left it to us,’ the inspector said shortly.

‘Had I known what I know now I’d have been only too delighted,’ returned Biggles, with a touch of asperity. ‘We were trailing a man whom we thought might lead us to Lazor. Lissie came here alone. When I didn’t hear from him I came down to find out what had happened. When I arrived on the scene he’d been trapped in a hay barn. When the Sheikh, otherwise Lazor, saw me he pulled a gun and used it. That’s what set the place on fire. The rick was burnt out. There was a plane hidden in it. I thought there might be one about. I run the Air Section at the Yard. That’s what really brought me here. That was after midnight and pitch-dark. To make a long story short, we lost sight of Lazor and at the finish he got away in my friend’s car.’

‘What’s all this blood? Do you know anything about that?’

‘The man we were trailing came here. The Sheikh was already here. Apparently there was a row and the Sheikh got to work with his favourite weapon — a razor. The other man got the edge of it and bolted. This is how we found things when we came in. If you ever meet the Sheikh, Inspector, you’d do well to remember that razor.’

‘I’d like to see him try that on me,’ growled the inspector.

‘He might, at that,’ murmured Biggles. ‘Of course, this happened before we got here, so we don’t know the details. As it was in the early hours of the morning there wasn’t much we could do about it, so we went back to the Yard to report.’

‘One way and another you seem to have made a mess of it,’ observed the Inspector.

Biggles smiled faintly. ‘As you say. But we haven’t finished yet. You see if you can do any better. By the way, last night there was an Alsatian here, which didn’t make things any easier. Where is it?’

‘We’ve packed it off to our kennels out of the way.’

‘What are you going to do about this mess, if I may ask?’

‘Oh, we shall proceed with our inquiries in our own way,’ replied the inspector airily.

‘Okay. Go ahead. We’ll just have a look round, and at what’s left of the plane, and push off.’

‘You won’t find anything. We’ve been over the place with a tooth-comb. However, that needn’t stop you looking, if that’s how you feel.’

Biggles nodded, and began his inspection, which did not take long. As the inspector had said, there appeared to be little in the way of helpful evidence. When, watched by the two policemen, he had finished, he went out.

As they walked towards the burnt-out barn Bertie questioned: 'Did you notice anything?'

'One little thing our friend the inspector may have overlooked,' Biggles answered. 'It may mean nothing or it may mean a lot. On the cover of the telephone directory someone had scribbled a number; presumably a phone number. I've memorized it. Caine may know what it means. Or the Sheikh may have written it. I'll ask Caine if he knows anything about it.'

'You didn't say anything to the inspector about Caine.'

'Why should I? He made it clear that he didn't want any help from us. Aside from that, I don't want him doing any high-handed stuff with Caine while he's in the state he's in. To upset him at the moment might do more harm than good. I'll call and see Caine on the way home.'

All they found at the barn, or where the barn had been, was its iron skeleton and a mass of cinders from which protruded the metal parts of the plane. This told them nothing they did not already know, so they wasted no time on it.

'Let's go home,' Biggles said. 'We'll call at the hospital on the way. There's just a chance that Caine may be able to tell us something about the telephone number. There is this about it,' he concluded, tartly. 'The Sheikh won't do any more flying in *this* machine; so the chances are he's still somewhere in this country. If we did nothing else here we cut off his escape by air, if that was the purpose of keeping an aeroplane here.'

'He may not know what's happened to it — I mean, if he went off in such a hurry that he didn't notice the fire,' Bertie pointed out. 'In that case he might come back to have a look-see.'

'He might, but I don't feel like squatting here for days or weeks on the off-chance,' stated Biggles. 'Let's press on.'

## CHAPTER 10

### STILL ON THE TRAIL

Biggles headed for home via the hospital at Repford.

On arrival he asked if he could see the doctor only to be told that he was out and wouldn't be back until later in the day.

'In that case I'd like to see the matron,' Biggles said. 'It's important or I wouldn't trouble her. I'm anxious to see one of your patients — Mr Caine. It'll only take a moment.'

There was a little delay, then the matron appeared. She seemed displeased at being taken from her duties, as was understandable, but when Biggles explained his purpose in returning so soon, she said she would find out if Mr Caine was willing to receive visitors. He was not to be upset. With that she went off, presently to come back to say it would be all right, but they were not to stay long. With that they were taken to Caine's bedside. He was looking better.

'Sorry to worry you again so soon,' Biggles said apologetically, 'but I want you, if you will, to answer a simple question. It's about a number written on the telephone directory at the farm. It's T.E. 79791. Does that mean anything to you?'

Caine's answer came without hesitation. 'Not a thing.'

'Then it wasn't you who wrote the number?'

'No. Definitely.'

'And you haven't any idea whose number it might be?'

'Not the slightest.'

'Who else *could* it have been?'

'It must have been Lazor. It couldn't have been anyone else.'

'Why not?'

'He's the only person apart from myself who has been to the farm — anyway to the best of my knowledge.'

'Do you ever remember him using the phone?'

'No. But that doesn't mean he never did use it. He might have made a call when I wasn't there.'

'Does that mean he was sometimes alone at the farm?'

'Yes. Occasionally I found him there when I arrived. He had come to use the farm as if it was his own home. Frankly, I thought that was a bit of a nerve and I wasn't too pleased about it. But what could I do? I didn't want to upset him by reminding him that it was *my* house.'

'So he would have used the phone in your absence!'

'Of course. If I wasn't there I wouldn't know anything about it, would I?'

'Obviously. Can you think of anyone he might have phoned?'

'No. I suppose he knew other people, but he never said anything to me

about them. He was secretive about anything personal. Sorry. I'd help you if I could.'

'I see. Okay. So that settles that. Just one final question. Whose idea was the camouflaged hangar — the dummy hay barn?'

'His.'

'What reason did he give?'

'He said it would be better if nobody saw the plane.'

'Who did he think might see it?'

'He said some official from the Ministry of Agriculture might turn up to check what stock I had at the farm.'

'Why didn't you keep any stock?'

'I couldn't be bothered with it. It would mean filling in forms and all that nonsense. When I took the place I thought of raising some cattle; but then I decided against it. They would have been in my way.'

'When you wanted to land on the pasture?'

'Exactly. My own landing ground was really the main idea in taking the farm.'

'It would have been cheaper to join a flying club.'

'I suppose so. But there were reasons why I wanted to be on my own.'

'One last detail. You needn't answer if you don't want to. It's only curiosity on my part. Why did you tell me you'd been chucked out of the RAF?'

'I was.'

'You were discharged on medical grounds. Defective vision. I wouldn't call that being chucked out.'

'It came to the same thing.'

'Was your sight bad?'

Caine hesitated. 'No. There was nothing wrong with it,' he admitted.

'So you faked a discharge. Why?'

'It was an easy way to get out of the Service.'

'Why did you want to leave?'

'Frankly, to make more money.'

'With the help of Lazor?'

'Yes. He had some ideas. They sounded fun.'

'But not so funny now.'

'I was involved before I knew what sort of a man he really was. I had begun to suspect it before you told me at the Icarian.'

Biggles got up. 'Well, that's all. I shall keep in touch with you. Make haste and get well. When you are, keep clear of Lazor.'

'You needn't tell me that,' replied Caine, in a hard voice.

'Be seeing you,' Biggles said as he departed.

Outside, in the car as they moved off, Bertie said: 'So we drew a blank.'

'I wouldn't say that. We still have the phone number and we know it wasn't Caine who wrote it. Everything points to it having been written by the



Sheikh.'

'You're sure Caine was telling the truth?'

'As sure as I can be sure of anything in this world. Caine knows now just how he stands with the Sheikh. It may turn out that the Sheikh made the mistake of his life in putting his mark on him. Caine isn't likely to forget that, or forgive it.'

'How are you going to find out who owns the phone number we've been chasing?'

'That shouldn't be difficult. From the initial letters I think the Sheikh — assuming it was his work — must have made a long-distance call, in which case there'd be a record of it at the Post Office. There might be an easier way than hunting through the Post Office files.'

'How?'

'By simply putting a call through to the number with which we're concerned. That should tell us who lives at the other end of the line.'

'Of course. What a silly ass I am. But hold hard, old boy. Isn't that a bit risky? I mean to say, if the person who answers is a pal of the Sheikh's he may smell a rat and put him on his guard.'

'Yes. That's possible, but as we're pressed for time we may have to take that risk. As a matter of fact, thinking about it I have a feeling I should know those initial letters of the number. If my memory isn't at fault I've used them myself at one time or another. However, we'll deal with this little problem when we get back to the Yard.'

They went on. Little more was said and in due course they arrived back at Headquarters to learn that there had been no developments in their absence. Biggles went straight to his desk and picked up the telephone. 'Let's see what the luck's like,' he said.

'Meaning what?' asked Bertie.

'I'm going to call the number I found at the farm to see who answers it.'

'Oh wait a minute, have a heart,' protested Bertie. 'How about wolfing a steak and a plate of chips before we play any more games? I'm tottering on my pins for need of something in the old fuel tank. Don't you ever eat?'

'Only when I feel like it,' returned Biggles cheerfully. 'You go ahead and find something to prop yourself up if you're as weak as all that. As far as I'm concerned it can wait. This is more important.'

'You may scare whoever is at the other end of the line, if it happens to be a pal of the Sheikh.'

'I'll take a chance on that. This will either give us a new lead or leave us running in ever-widening circles.' Watched by the others Biggles asked the operator at the switchboard what the letters T.E. stood for and then asked for the number. 'Podbury, Surrey,' he murmured, while he waited to be connected.

'That rings a bell,' put in Ginger softly.

With the receiver to his ear Biggles listened; and as he did so a slow smile

told those watching him that he had gathered the information he wanted. 'Sorry; I must have got the wrong number,' he said, and hung up. Looking at the others he remarked: 'I thought there was something vaguely familiar about that phone number. I once had occasion to use it, but that was some time ago.'

'Well, come on. Out with it,' requested Ginger impatiently.

'It's a flying club. Podbury Flying Club.'

'Ah-ha. That smells interesting. Who did you speak to?'

'The Secretary. He didn't give his name. I didn't ask for it. When he said Podbury Flying Club that was all I needed to know.'

'Do you know him?'

'No. Anyway, not offhand. I may recognize him when I see him. I only ever called there once. That was when I was running short of petrol and dropped in for a fill-up.'

'I can't recall that we ever had any trouble there,' Ginger said.

'How much do we know about them? You might look up their file.'

Ginger went to the steel filing cabinet and took out a folder. Having flipped over some loose sheets he read aloud: 'Podbury Flying Club and Flying School. Private company. Registered August 5th, 1964. Resident Secretary and General Manager, Kendrick Seaton-Thompson, RAF Retired. Telephone T.E.79791. Two Auster Aiglets, One Piper Cub. Open on Sundays.'

'Anything else? Nothing about a Moth?'

'No. That's the lot.' Ginger closed the folder and replaced it. 'So it looks as if the Sheikh rang up the club from the farm,' he observed, as he shut the cabinet.

'Apparently. But it doesn't necessarily follow that he's a member, although he must know somebody there.'

'So what's the next move?'

'I shall run down and have a look at the place. I thought it better not to ask questions over the phone.'

'Are you hoping to find the Sheikh there?' inquired Bertie.

'I suppose it's just possible, but that would be hoping for too much. There's a fair chance that somebody at Podbury may know something about him. The fact that he may have rung them up at some time suggests that he has some contact with the airfield. Don't forget the Sheikh is himself an R.A.F. trained pilot. This may be where the fellow Caine told us about, the chap who flew the Sheikh to the farm, keeps his machine. He said it was an old Gypsy Moth. It must be privately owned. If it was a club machine it would be in our record — or it should be.'

'The Sheikh called his pilot Tommy,' reminded Bertie.

'That's such a common name it isn't much to go on.'

'I agree, but a small organization like a flying club can't exactly be swarming with people whose Christian name is Thomas. Anyhow, I'd like to have a few words with this particular specimen to find out how much he knows about the Sheikh. That's why I'm going to Podbury right away. We've

no time to lose. The Sheikh must know this Tommy pretty well, or he wouldn't call him by his Christian name.'

'Tell me this,' requested Ginger. 'Why should the Sheikh write the number of the club on the cover of the telephone directory?'

Biggles shook his head. 'How could I possibly know the answer to that? But I could make a guess. He had forgotten the number — if he ever knew it. He was making the call from Hampshire. It would be a trunk-call. If he didn't know the number he wanted he would ask the operator to get it for him. Having got it, in order not to forget he would jot it down on the nearest paper available. In this case it was the phone book. I've done the same thing myself. Bear in mind that at the time this happened the Sheikh had no reason to suppose we were likely to roll up at the farm. Anyhow, whatever the reason, he made a note of the number, and that's all that matters. Obviously the Sheikh wanted to get in touch with somebody at the club. It may have been this fellow Tommy. It may have been to ask him to fly down to the farm to pick him up. No matter. Tommy is the man I want to see. I'd also like to see his logbook. If it has been properly kept it should tell us how often he's been to the farm, and how many times he's had the Sheikh for a passenger.'

Bertie came in again. 'Caine isn't a member of the Podbury club, that's certain, or he'd have known Tommy when he landed the Sheikh at the farm.'

'You make a point,' agreed Biggles. 'I don't think Caine was a member of any club. I don't see how he could have been, breaking the regulations as he was. That's why he had to have a private landing field. Of course, he would have to get petrol from somewhere, and he may have landed at Podbury for that purpose. A private landing ground would suit the Sheikh no doubt. I suspect he was the brains behind that. But we're wasting time.' Biggles got up. 'I'm going to Podbury right away,' he announced.

'How about a snack first?' pleaded Bertie. 'You may be a bally camel, but I'm not. I'm wobbling on my pins for lack of nourishment.'

'Then you'd better stay here. I'll take Ginger with me.'

'Suits me,' declared Ginger. 'How do we go?'

Biggles hesitated. 'I was thinking of going down by road, as it's no great distance; but on second thoughts it might be better to fly down. We could make some excuse for landing. This will have to be handled carefully and a police car might set people wondering what was going on. We'll fly. And we'd better get weaving, or we might find our bird has taken wing. Algy, you and Bertie can take turns to have a meal. I don't care what you do as long as somebody is always at the phone in case I come through with something urgent. Come on, Ginger. Let's go.'

# CHAPTER 11

## BIGGLES GETS TOUGH

It was getting on for four o'clock, with the daylight beginning to fade, when Biggles and Ginger landed their Auster on the small, somewhat primitive airfield used by the Podbury Flying Club. Like many similar organizations of this class, the landing area had been nothing more than a large field, and that was really what it remained. But little more was required. What had been a farm worker's cottage, an ancient half-timbered dwelling with a thatched roof, had been turned into a club-house, a windstocking on a pole in front of it proclaiming its new purpose. A car stood at the door.

For the rest, a single hangar provided the accommodation for aircraft. An area of macadam, with a petrol pump behind it, had been laid out for 'hard-standing'. At the time of the Auster's arrival this was occupied by an Aiglet on which two men were at work. A little to one side, alone and unattended, was a Gipsy Moth which must have been even older than the Aiglet.

'There's the Moth, at all events,' murmured Biggles as, having landed, they walked towards the club-house. 'Caine was right about that; there can't be many of them left in circulation, so I think we can accept that the one that landed at the farm came from here.'

'The place doesn't seem to be exactly buzzing with activity,' observed Ginger.

'One wouldn't expect it to be at this hour and at this time of the year. It's no weather for flying instruction, and it'll be dark inside half an hour, anyway,' replied Biggles. 'Most of the business is probably done at weekends, when pupils can get time off. This is no better and no worse than most of the other small, privately owned clubs up and down the country. Generally it's only a handful of enthusiasts who keep them going. We shall be lucky to find the secretary still in his office. If he isn't we'll have a word with those two mechanics.'

In the event they were lucky. As they walked into the cottage a man was just leaving a room marked 'Office'. He was a shortish well-built man of about forty-five with a florid complexion, adorned by one of those outsize moustaches affected by some wartime pilots.

Looking at them in some surprise he said unsmilingly: 'I suppose you want some petrol. The men working on the tarmac will attend to you. Don't be long about it. It's their knocking-off time. I'm just off home myself.'

'Just a minute,' Biggles said. 'Are you the Club Secretary?'

'I am,' was the curt reply.

'Flight Lieutenant Seaton-Thompson, I believe?'

'That's right.'

'Sorry to detain you, but I've come down to have a few words on a matter

of some importance.'

'Some other time. I told you. I was just off home.'

'No. Now.' There must have been something in the way Biggles spoke that brought the Secretary to a halt. He frowned, looking hard at Biggles' face.

'What is it?'

'We're police officers from Scotland Yard,' Biggles stated. 'My name's Bigglesworth. I'm in charge of air operations.'

'Oh, so you're the famous Bigglesworth,' was the answer, spoken slowly with a suspicion of a sneer. 'I've heard of you. All right. I can't imagine what you want to see me about, but come in. You won't find anything wrong here.'

The secretary turned back into his office. Biggles and Ginger followed and chairs were indicated. 'Well, and what's the trouble?' inquired the secretary abruptly when they were all seated.

'I merely want to ask you one or two simple questions,' Biggles replied evenly.

'Fire away.'

'Have you among your members a man whose Christian name is Thomas?'

'It won't take long to answer that. No.'

'You're quite sure?'

'Dammit, of course I'm sure. We haven't many members and I know them all intimately. What's this fellow Thomas been up to?'

'That's what I was hoping you'd be able to tell me.'

'Well, I don't know anyone of that name, so that settles that. Is that all?'

'Not quite. Do you by any chance happen to know a man named Caine?'

'No.'

'He's never been here?'

'Not to my knowledge. Who is he? What is he?'

'Among other things he's an ex-RAF pilot. He now flies a machine of his own — a Starfinder.'

'Never heard of him. Of course, he may have dropped in for petrol when I wasn't here.'

'In which case there should be a record of it in your books.'

'I suppose so.'

'Perhaps you wouldn't mind checking?'

'What — now?'

'Yes. Now.'

'But damn it all, you can't hold me up for that. Unless you can give me a definite date a check would take some time.'

'I realize that.'

The secretary had another long look at Biggles' face. 'All right,' he grumbled. 'I'll tell you what I'll do. I'll slip out and ask my fellows if they know anything about this.'

'Very well.'

The secretary went out.

Ginger looked at Biggles. 'Well?' he said softly.

'He's not telling the truth,' Biggles answered. 'When a man resorts to lies he has something to hide. He's worried. I fancy he's only left us to give himself time to think. He'll slip up, presently.'

The secretary came back. 'No, they know nothing about a chap named Caine, or a Starfinder,' he announced breezily. 'Now I hope that's all.'

'Tell me this,' Biggles said. 'According to my records, you stated, when you applied for registration, that the machines the club had on its establishment were two Aiglets and a Piper Cub. Is that correct?'

'As you seem to know, why ask me?'

'What about the Gipsy Moth I saw outside?'

'That happens to be mine.'

'Why isn't it shown on your application form for registration?'

'It's my personal property. It's never let out on hire and it's never used for training. Now perhaps you wouldn't mind telling me what all this fuss is about?'

'That's reasonable,' conceded Biggles. 'It has come to our notice that there has been some infringement of Regulations, and, as I need hardly tell you, with the increase in air traffic this is a serious matter. We're checking up on everybody — not only you. Have you ever put down your Moth on an unauthorized landing ground, leaving out unpreventable emergency landings?'

'Certainly not.'

'You have never, for instance, landed on a field in Hampshire?'

'No. Why should I?'

Biggles shrugged. 'You might have taken a passenger somewhere using your Moth as an air taxi.'

'We don't do that sort of flying. Why should anyone come to an out-of-the-way place like this to engage an air taxi when there are plenty of people who specialize in that kind of work, with the right sort of machines standing by ready to go anywhere at a moment's notice?'

'There may be people who prefer not to go near an official Customs airport,' Biggles suggested.

'Such as who?'

'Well, a smuggler, or an escaped prisoner on the run, for instance.'

The secretary grunted. 'We're not open for that sort of member. We're particular who we accept here.'

'If you had an application for membership from a man whom you had reason to suspect wasn't all that he should be, you'd turn him down, eh?'

'On the spot.'

'Even if he had plenty of money?'

'Money would make no difference. Anyone who started flashing his wallet would go out on his ear,' declared the secretary.

Biggles looked him straight in the eyes. 'Have you ever had an application

from a man named Lazor?’

The brief hesitation before the question was answered was not missed by Biggles. ‘Never heard of the man. Who is he?’

‘I can only tell you he’s an extremely nasty piece of work, so should he ever turn up here you’d be well advised to have nothing to do with him,’ Biggles said.

‘He isn’t likely to come here, but purely as a matter of interest, what’s he done?’

‘Among other things he’s just sliced half a man’s face off.’

The secretary looked horrified. ‘Good God! Who’s the man?’

‘The fellow I mentioned earlier: a private owner named Caine. Now you know what I’m driving at!’

The secretary lit a cigarette with a hand that shook slightly. He then took a bottle of whisky from a cupboard and poured himself a drink. ‘Have one?’ he invited, holding up the bottle.

‘No thanks.’

‘Er — where’s Caine now? He isn’t here, if that’s what you’re getting at.’

‘I know he isn’t here. He’s in hospital with twenty stitches in his face. I’m looking for the skunk who did it.’

‘And you suspect — this fellow — Lazor?’

‘I don’t suspect, I know,’ Biggles said evenly.

‘How do you know?’

‘That’s my business.’

‘So if Caine dropped in here for petrol I’d be able to recognize him,’ the secretary said, with a smile that was obviously forced.

‘That won’t happen.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because Caine no longer has an aircraft.’

‘You mean — he’s sold it?’

‘There’s nothing to sell except scrap metal. The machine ran into trouble and was burnt out.’

The secretary stared. He moistened his lips. ‘What bad luck.’

‘You can call it that.’ Biggles got up. ‘Well, since you can’t help us we’ll be getting along. Sorry to have kept you.’

In another moment he would have gone, but at this juncture the door was opened and a man put his head in. ‘Just to let you know I’m going home now,’ he said. ‘Good night, Tommy.’ With that he departed, closing the door.

Under Biggles’ cold scrutiny the secretary’s face slowly lost its colour.

‘So you’re Tommy,’ murmured Biggles.

‘That’s what my friends call me. People named Thompson often get this nickname Tommy.’

‘I was slow not to think of it,’ returned Biggles with a wry smile. ‘You might have pointed it out earlier, when I told you I was looking for someone named Tommy.’

‘You said nothing of the sort,’ disputed Thompson. ‘You said you were looking for a man with the Christian name of Thomas. It didn’t occur to me that I was the man you wanted.’

‘All I can say to that is, it should have done,’ retorted Biggles crisply. ‘It would have saved a lot of time and talk — unless there was some reason why you didn’t want me to know you were Tommy.’

‘But that’s ridiculous! Why shouldn’t I want you to know?’

‘You should be able to answer that question better than me.’

‘Okay. So I’m Tommy. What about it?’ demanded Thompson belligerently.

‘There’s one thing about it that becomes quite clear,’ replied Biggles, with iron in his voice. ‘You haven’t much respect for the truth.’

‘Are you calling me a liar?’

‘Not to mince words, you can put it like that if you like. To that I would add, you’re not very good at lying, either. You may do better with more practice.’

‘You’ve called me a liar. Prove it!’

‘Very well; if you really mean that, it should present no difficulty. You told me you’d never met a man named Lazor. You told me you’d never met a private owner named Caine. You told me you’d never landed your Moth on a field in Hampshire. In fact, you flew Lazor down to Hampshire, landing on a farm belonging to Caine. Is that enough, or do you want me to go on?’

‘So Caine’s been bleating,’ growled Thompson.

‘So will you bleat if one day you get the sharp edge of a razor on your face, as seems not unlikely the way you’re behaving.’

Thompson, now white-faced, made a gesture. ‘Okay. What are you going to do about it?’

‘That, to some extent, depends on you.’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You really want me to tell you?’

‘Yes. I have a right to know.’

Biggles shook his head sadly. ‘It’s extraordinary how people who break the law, when they’re found out, start talking about their rights. But let it pass. Very well. Let’s get down to brass tacks.’ Biggles lit a cigarette.

‘Let’s have a light on the scene,’ Thompson said, getting up and switching on the single electric bulb that hung down from the ceiling.



## CHAPTER 12

### THE TRUTH COMES OUT

When Thompson had resumed his seat Biggles continued: 'You say you want to know what I'm doing about this?'

'Yes.'

'Very well. For the time being the answer is nothing. What I do in the future will depend on how far you've got yourself involved in the improper practices that have been going on from this airfield. That is something I shall learn in due course, with or without your help. That happens to be my job. I don't go about making trouble, but when I find it I try to put it right. That's what I'm paid for. Someone would have to do it, if not me. There's a lot of funny business going on in aviation these days, now that crooks have discovered that aircraft can be made to serve their purposes. At this stage of our proceedings my advice to you is to come clean and tell me all you know.'

'And if I refuse to talk?'

Biggles shrugged. 'That's up to you. Please yourself. Send for your lawyer if you like. You're under no compulsion to incriminate yourself. But I'll tell you this. I know enough already to have this place closed down and cancel your pilot's licence. The man I'm after is Lazor. He's wanted on several charges. You know, of course, that he's an escaped prisoner. He got away from Dartmoor some time ago.'

Thompson stared. 'I certainly did not know that.' He spoke with difficulty, but with an emphasis that suggested it was the truth.

'I believe you,' Biggles said. 'I would hardly expect him to tell you.'

'This explains a mystery.'

'How so?'

'When Lazor first came to stay in the village he told me his name was Grey.'

'He would hardly dare to use his real name — it had been too often in the newspapers,' put in Biggles dryly. 'How did you learn his real name?'

'When he applied for membership of the club. By that time he knew what I was doing. We first got into conversation at the village pub. That was natural because he wore an R.A.F. tie. We don't take just anybody, and for insurance reasons alone we have to be careful who we allow to use our machines. When he asked about joining the club he said he was a qualified pilot. To prove it he had to produce his logbook. It was in the name of Lazor. I asked him why he was calling himself Grey. He told me confidentially that it was because he had left his wife and didn't want her to find him.'

'And you accepted that?'

'Why not? It sounded reasonable. His domestic troubles were no concern of mine.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'Lazor's an expert at finding reasons for anything. Go on. Did Lazor give any reason for wanting to join your club?'

'Not at first. That came later, when he learned I had a plane of my own.'

'He had ideas of how it could be used to your mutual profit, no doubt?'

'Yes.'

'What did he want you to do? You might as well finish the story,' prompted Biggles.

'He asked me to drop a message for him. This happened only recently.'

'Where was this message to be dropped?'

'In France.'

'He had a reason for that, too, I imagine.'

'Yes. It was a birthday greeting for his girl friend. She lived on the edge of a big field near Berck, just the other side of the Channel. She'd be waiting to collect the message.'

'By a message you mean simply a letter?'

'No. It was a package. A present.'

'What was in this package?'

'I've no idea. I didn't ask him.'

'But you did as he suggested?'

'Not yet. He only gave it to me a few days ago and I've been waiting for the right sort of weather. It would have to be done at night. I wouldn't have risked a trip like that in broad daylight for fear of being spotted.'

'So you knew this was an illegal enterprise?'

'Of course.'

'How was the girl to know she was to collect a message?'

'If I blipped my engine she'd come out and show a light. I was to drop the packet as close to it as possible.'

Biggles shook his head. 'You must have been crazy to take on such a job. It could have landed you in gaol.'

'I know, but Lazor seemed such a decent fellow...'

'I know — I know. The point is, have you still got this packet?'

'Yes.'

'That could be lucky for you. Where is it?'

'Here, in my safe.'

'Mind if I have a look at it?'

Thompson hesitated. 'It isn't my property.'

'I doubt very much if it's the property of the man who gave it to you, either,' retorted Biggles, grimly.

Thompson took a bunch of keys from the drawer of his desk, went to a safe against the wall, unlocked it and took out a small brown paper parcel to which was attached a long black and white cotton streamer. As he walked back to Biggles with it in his hand, Ginger leapt to his feet staring at the window. Then, without a word he made a dash for the door and disappeared. He was away about a minute. When he walked back into the room Biggles said:

‘What was all that about?’

‘I could have sworn I saw a face at us through the window,’ Ginger explained. ‘When I went out I couldn’t see anyone. It may have been a shadow.’

Biggles did not comment. He was looking at the package which Thompson had handed to him.

Said Thompson: ‘As you know so much perhaps you know what’s in it.’ There was a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

‘I could make a guess,’ replied Biggles quietly.

‘What would you say?’

‘Some jewellery. Possibly a string of pearls.’

‘Pearls. What rot!’

‘Let’s see if I’m right.’ As he said this Biggles picked up a pair of scissors that lay on Thompson’s desk.

‘You can’t do that,’ protested Thompson.

‘Why not?’

‘It isn’t yours. As you can see it’s addressed to a woman.’

Looking at Thompson’s face Biggles said: ‘You’re sure you don’t know what’s inside this?’

‘How the hell would I know? I don’t open other people’s mail.’

‘It might be as well if you did — this sort of mail,’ replied Biggles, as he proceeded to cut open the package.

‘There’ll be trouble about this,’ declared Thompson.

‘You’re dead right, and you look like being in the thick of it,’ said Biggles coolly.

He removed the outer wrapping to reveal a small cardboard box. He opened it. Without speaking, from a nest of cotton wool he lifted a long pearl necklace. He held it up. Then, after a glance at Thompson’s face he allowed the pearls to fall back in the box. He put it in his pocket.

‘I’m taking charge of this,’ he stated. ‘It’s stolen property. Now you see what you were doing, how do you feel about it?’

‘I’d no idea...’ blurted Thompson, now as white as the proverbial lily.

‘Maybe not, but you must have known you were playing a dangerous game.’

‘It’s the first time, on my oath,’ declared Thompson. In a resigned voice he went on: ‘I must have been crazy. Okay. So I’m caught. What are you going to do with me? I suppose I’m under arrest!’

‘Not for the moment. But don’t try to run away. I shall want to know where I can find you.’

‘I live at the Green Man — the pub in the village.’

‘You live alone?’

‘No. With my wife.’

‘Very well. We’ll leave things like that for the time being. Now you’d better tell me where I can find Lazor. He’s dangerous, so after this you’d

better keep clear of him.'

'He's here,' muttered Thompson.

'You mean — on the aerodrome?'

'Yes. Or he was half an hour ago. I was just going to join him when you turned up. We were going back to the pub together.'

'Was it to speak to him that you went out shortly after we came in?'

'Yes. I went to tell him I might be held up for a few minutes.'

'Did you tell him why?'

'I had to give a reason for the delay. I said I had visitors.'

'Did you tell him who the visitors were?'

'I said two detectives had arrived from Scotland Yard.'

'What did he say to that?'

'He told me to come back to you, but I was to refuse to say anything. You couldn't force me to talk.'

'Pity you didn't tell me about this earlier. I imagine he'll be on his way by now, leaving you to face the music.'

At this moment there came from outside a sound which was familiar to everyone in the office. It was the hiss and burst of noise made by an aero engine being started.

Two swift strides took Biggles to the window. It was now practically dark, but there was still just enough light for the Moth to be seen taxiing out to the runway.

'Who's in that machine?' rapped out Biggles.

'It must be Lazor. There's no other pilot here except me.'

There was a rush for the door. By the time they were all outside the Moth was running tail up, on the point of taking off.

'So we've lost him,' snapped Biggles. 'And I fancy you have lost your Moth, Thompson. How much petrol was there in the tank?'

'Not much. Half an hour at the outside. I had her up this morning, testing. She was running low in fuel when I came in. That's why I left her out, to be topped up later.'

'I'll see which way he goes,' Ginger said tersely, and raced towards the Auster that had brought them down.

'Wait!' shouted Biggles.

Ginger ignored the order; but he may not have heard it above the noise of the Moth, now airborne.

Biggles started to run after him, but stopped when he saw Ginger was already in the cockpit with the engine running. He stood and watched the Auster take off, then returned to Thompson.

'What are you going to do now?' inquired Thompson cynically.

'I shall stay here,' Biggles said shortly. 'I take it you have a car?'

'Yes. But what good will that do you? You can't chase a plane in a car.'

'We shall see.'

'See? How? What are you talking about?'

‘My machine is fitted with short wave radio.’

‘But we can’t receive signals here.’

‘No, I wouldn’t expect that; but they can be received by my staff pilots at the Yard. They can phone any news to me here. I’ll ring them and warn them what has happened, then they’ll be ready. What about you? Are you going to co-operate with me, or are you taking sides with Lazor?’

‘I haven’t much choice, have I?’ replied Thompson lugubriously.

‘No, you haven’t, unless you want to end up really in the soup. Tell me this. Do you know if Lazor has had any experience of night flying?’

‘Not to my knowledge. If he has, it wasn’t here. Why do you ask?’

‘Because, obviously, if he hasn’t he’s likely to break something, possibly his neck, trying to get back on the ground. I imagine there are no navigational aids in your Moth?’

‘Nothing like that. Just the usual instruments, that’s all.’

‘Then Lazor may come down no great distance from here. If my assistant goes down after him he’ll need help. After what’s happened Lazor will not only be dangerous, but desperate. It must have been he who was peeping at us through the window. If he saw you handing me the pearls you’ll have to watch your step, too, if you want to keep your face in one piece. I’ve told you what he’s done to Caine.’

‘Will your assistant be able to keep in touch with the Moth in these conditions?’

‘If he finds him and gets on his tail he’s not likely to be shaken off. But it’s time I got on the phone.’

They went back into the office. ‘You needn’t stay if you don’t want to,’ Biggles said. ‘I can manage if you leave me your car.’

‘I’ll stay,’ decided Thompson. ‘I want to know what happens to my machine. All the money I have in the world is tied up in that aircraft.’

‘If you’d been more careful in your choice of friends you’d have no cause to worry about it,’ Biggles pointed out with scant sympathy.

He put through a priority call to Scotland Yard and was soon telling Algy what had happened. ‘Ginger will know he can’t contact me here, but he’ll realize that if he speaks to you you’ll be able to tell me where he is and what he’s doing. You know my number here — 79791. I’ll stand by. You should be getting a signal pretty soon because when the Sheikh finds he’s running out of petrol he’ll be glad to get on the ground anywhere. There is this about it; he hasn’t enough petrol to get out of the country. Okay. Better tell your switchboard operator to keep this line open. It’s urgent and important.’

Biggles hung up. ‘All we can do now is wait,’ he told Thompson, lighting a cigarette.

‘I’ve been a fool,’ Thompson said bitterly.

‘I thought you might arrive at that conclusion,’ returned Biggles. ‘It’s a bit late in the day, but better late than never,’ he concluded cheerfully.

‘The weather’s pretty murky,’ observed Thompson from the window. ‘Do

you think this chap of yours, Ginger, will be able to stick with Lazor?’

‘He should, but much will depend on the weather. He has the legs of him and he’s an old hand at this sort of exercise. If he should lose him he’ll come back here and tell me about it.’ Biggles stubbed his cigarette and lit another. Silence fell.

# CHAPTER 13

## MORE MYSTERY

For what must have been getting on for twenty minutes nothing happened. After looking at his watch Biggles commented: 'If you're right about the amount of petrol the Moth had on board Lazor must be getting near the end of his tether.'

Then the phone rang. It was Algy. He said: 'Ginger has been through. He's still tailing the Moth. He says it started off towards the coast as if the Sheikh might be making for France. Then something seemed to make him change his mind and he struck off on a new course northwest. He's still on it, losing height. Cloud is breaking up from the west. Ginger says he doesn't think the Sheikh has spotted him, but his flying is a bit erratic as if he's not sure of himself. That's all. Hold the line clear. I'll come back when there's more news.'

Biggles hung up and passed this information on to Thompson, who answered: 'I'd have thought Lazor would have been able to give your pal the slip in the clouds.'

To which Biggles replied: 'He might if he spots him. I'd say he's too taken up with what he's doing to bother to look behind him. No doubt Ginger will stick in the blind spot under his tail. Lazor will want to keep within sight of the ground, I imagine. With no artificial horizon or other blind-flying instruments he's probably wise to do that, particularly if he hasn't had much experience of night flying. If he found himself in heavy cloud anything could happen.'

'So now he's heading north-west,' Thompson said. 'Where does he think he's going? What's he looking for? I'm thinking of what's likely to happen to my machine.'

Biggles answered: 'Maybe he's simply looking for a safe place to get back on the carpet. No doubt when he left here he was only concerned with getting away from me. Wait a minute, though. North-west. By now he should be over Hampshire. He knows that country from visiting Caine's farm. That could be his objective. He knows all about that landing field at Twotrees Farm. So do you. You landed him there at least once, to my knowledge.'

'That's right,' agreed Thompson. 'He may be reckoning on hiding up in the house. I know there's a stock of canned food there.'

The phone rang again. Biggles listened. Algy spoke, now in a voice brittle with excitement. He said: 'Ginger says the Sheikh is trying to get down at Caine's farm. He's overshot twice... circling again for another try. Hang on.' There was a delay, then Algy came back — with an exclamation. 'He's done it! He's overshot again and piled up in the trees. Ginger's going down to see if he's hurt.' Another pause. Then Algy spoke more slowly. 'Nothing more

coming through. I think Ginger must have landed.'

'I'll hang on to see if he comes back,' Biggles said.

A minute passed. Algy said: 'Nothing coming through. He must be on the ground.'

'I'll hold on,' Biggles said.

Two or three minutes passed before he spoke again. 'You still there, Algy?'

'Yes,' confirmed Algy.

'Still no news?'

'Not a word.'

'Okay. I agree, Ginger must be on the floor. He may be hurt. I'm going to the farm to find out what's happened. Send Bertie along to meet me there. I may need help. That's all.' With that Biggles hung up. Turning to Thompson he said tersely, 'I'm going to Hampshire. Twotrees Farm. It sounds as if there's been a mess. Lazor's crashed, and Ginger, my assistant, appears to have gone down to help him. When I was last at the farm the police were there, but they've probably gone by now, in which case there'll be no sort of help within miles, I shall have to borrow your car.'

'It would be quicker to fly down.'

'In what?'

'One of our Aiglets is serviceable, ready for the morning. Why not take it?'

'That's an idea,' Biggles said. 'I'll do that. What about you? What are you going to do?'

'If it's all the same to you I'll come with you in the spare seat.'

'With what object? You don't want to get mixed up in this.'

'I'm mixed up enough as it is. I was thinking, I could fly my machine back here when you've finished with it. That would save you time and trouble.'

Biggles hesitated for a moment. 'Very well,' he said slowly. 'But no tricks, or it'll be the worse for you,' he added sternly. 'You're sure I can trust you not to change your mind and take sides with Lazor if we should find him?'

'You needn't worry about that,' answered Thompson trenchantly.

'Knowing what I know now, I've finished with him. He's got me into enough trouble already.'

'Good. Now you're talking sense. Is the Aiglet all right for petrol?'

'Yes. Plenty. I saw her refuelled myself.'

'Fine. I'll warn my office what we're doing and we'll get away.' Biggles picked up the phone.

Presently they went out into the night. Biggles cast a critical eye on the sky. 'It seems to be clearing,' he remarked, as they walked quickly to the hangar.

In five minutes they were on their way, Biggles at the controls, with Thompson occupying the second seat. Biggles flew a straight course to his objective. He had flown over the country so often that he did not even have to refer to the map which he saw tucked into the side pocket of the cockpit. The



clouds became more broken as they headed west, wide gaps allowing the moon to come through, improving the general visibility enough for easily recognizable landmarks to be picked up. This, of course, was where air experience was such an advantage.

In half an hour he was circling over the region of Twotrees Farm. The big field on the high ground, with its isolated farmhouse on the boundary, lay open to the sky. No light showed from the house. In fact, there were no lights of any sort within some distance of it. The nearest were car headlights moving on a distant main road. Losing height he continued to circle, his eyes probing the dim scene below. What he was looking for was Ginger's Auster which he felt sure must be somewhere on the field. He did not want to risk collision with it when he touched down. He had assumed that it would be there, having made a safe landing. The Moth, according to Ginger, had overshot the field and crashed, so there was no cause to worry about that.

It took him a few minutes to spot the Auster. Then he spotted it tucked in tight against the track, near the trees, where the cars had been parked on their previous visit. Strangely, he thought, there was no sign of Ginger. Ginger was not to know, had no means of knowing, that he had been followed by one of the club Aiglets; but he would hear it circling, and that should have brought him into the open to see who it was: unless he thought it might be a friend of Lazor, in which case he would take care not to show himself too readily.

Had Lazor been injured in the crash, and Ginger gone to find help, as naturally he would? Was that the answer? It was a possibility.

It took Biggles some time to locate the Moth, or, rather, the wreckage of it, the reason being, as Ginger had reported, it had overshot and crashed into the wood, to disappear almost completely under the trees. The Auster, as would be expected, had stopped as close to it as it could get.

The picture was now fairly clear. Ginger had seen the Moth crash. He had landed, and taxied on to get as near as he could to the place where it had ended its career in order to lose no time getting to it should it take fire. Then what? What would he do next? Where had he gone? That, obviously, would depend on what he found in the wreck. If Lazor had been killed in the crash, as was possible but by no means certain, it seemed Ginger's most likely course would be to go to the farm to use the phone to call the police or an ambulance. In that case there would be a light in the house. But there was no light, so apparently he wasn't there.

Biggles wasted no more time in speculation. Satisfied there was no obstruction in the field, he made his approach, giving himself plenty of room and landed. As soon as the Aiglet had run to a stop he gave the engine another burst of throttle which took it on to the stationary Auster. There he stopped, jumped out and walked quickly to Ginger's aircraft. It only took a moment to confirm that there was no one with it.

'Ginger!' Biggles said sharply.

There was no answer.

‘We’d better have a look at your Moth,’ he said to Thompson, who had lost no time in following him. ‘From what I can see of it from here it won’t be doing any more flying.’

‘Damn the fellow,’ muttered Thompson angrily. ‘I’d become quite attached to that old kite.’

Biggles did not answer, and together, going through the gap in the fence where it had been torn up by the overshooting Moth, they hurried on to the machine in question. It was only a distance of a few yards. When they got to it they found it in the condition that might have been expected in view of what had happened, provided it hadn’t gone into the tree directly head-on. In this respect the old machine had been lucky. Probably more by luck than judgment, having torn through the fence and crossed the track, it had passed between two stout trees. This had resulted in the wings being sheared off and hurled back almost flat against the fuselage. The wings had therefore taken most of the shock of impact, and the fuselage, while tilted on its nose, was not seriously damaged beyond having most of the fabric ripped off by the sharp ends of low branches that had been snapped off short.

‘It looks to me as if Lazor might have been lucky and got away with it,’ observed Biggles, again speaking from experience. He had seen this sort of crash before.

With some difficulty he scrambled up the mutilated wing until he could see in the rear seat. It was empty. As Lazor was presumably flying solo that was to be expected, so he made his way forward to the cockpit. There was no one there, either. The safety-belt hung loose, having been torn out by the roots by the weight of the pilot’s body as it had been thrown forward against the instrument panel. His head or face must have struck the altimeter, for the glass had been splintered. But he could find no sign of blood, although in the dark he could not be sure of that.

‘Nobody here,’ he told Thompson tersely as he clambered back to the ground.

‘How do you account for that?’ asked Thompson.

‘I can’t,’ returned Biggles succinctly. ‘Let’s have a look round.’

They searched the ground on all sides of the wrecked machine as far as this was possible in the dark. Still not entirely satisfied, Biggles went back to the Auster to collect the torch which was always carried. It was not in its usual place. The reason was not hard to find. ‘The torch has gone,’ he told Thompson. ‘Ginger must have taken it.’

‘Why?’

‘Don’t ask me. To look at something, or for something, I suppose.’

They made another search in the tangle of torn twigs and branches round the wreck, but it was without result.

‘What do you make of it?’ Thompson asked Biggles.

Biggles answered thoughtfully. ‘I don’t know what to think, and that’s a fact. It looks as if Lazor couldn’t have been seriously hurt or he’d still be here,

and, in all probability, Ginger with him. He wouldn't attempt to carry a helpless, perhaps unconscious man, for any distance. Had that been the case, the natural thing would be to make him as comfortable as possible and then go off for assistance.'

'Where would he go for help? There's nowhere near.'

'The obvious place would be the farm, to get on the telephone.'

'That wouldn't have been any use.'

'Why not?'

'The phone's out of action. The wires are down. Didn't you notice?'

'No. I didn't see that. I was in too much of a hurry to get to the planes.'

'The Moth must have taken the wires with it as it overshot the field. Pulled over one of the posts at the same time.'

'Pity about that,' Biggles said. 'It means we're out of touch with anyone. No, wait a minute,' he corrected himself. 'We've still got the Auster. I could use the radio to call the Yard. That would mean taking it into the air. I'd rather not do that yet — in case Ginger is somewhere not far away. Lazor may still be on his feet, in which case I hope Ginger has more sense than to tackle him single-handed.' He raised his voice and called: 'Ginger!'

There was no answer.

He shouted again. 'Ginger!'

Still no reply.

He looked at Thompson. 'Where the devil can he have gone?'

Thompson answered. 'He's nowhere near, that's certain, or he must have heard you. So what are you going to do?'

'What can we do? I don't like leaving here in case Ginger comes back to collect his machine. For that matter, Lazor might try to grab it, if he's still able to move about.'

'How about trying the house, to see if there's anyone there?' suggested Thompson.

'We might as well; but it won't take two of us to do that,' Biggles said reflectively. 'You go. I'll wait here in case Ginger comes back. Matter of fact the police were in the house when I was last here, so there's just a chance that a constable may have been left to keep an eye on the place. Shout if you want me. I should hear you from here.'

'I'll do that,' agreed Thompson, and set off across the field in the direction of the farmhouse.

Biggles, looking worried, more on Ginger's account than about Lazor, made his way slowly to the Aiglet, lit a cigarette and prepared to wait for something to happen. He had not long to wait. Within a minute something did happen; something that brought him to attention with stiffened muscles. Gunshots. Three. One, and a moment later, two more. They were some distance off, but close enough to increase his anxiety for Ginger. Who was shooting? Lazor, he knew, carried a gun. Had Ginger put one in his pocket? He couldn't remember. He thought not.

He did not move. There were reasons against it. Lazor was on the loose. He might make off in the plane if he left it. Then there was Thompson. He had told him he would wait. He might run into trouble at the farmhouse. So all he could do was stand there, feeling worried and frustrated.

# CHAPTER 14

## THE UNEXPECTED HAPPENS

When Ginger took off in the Auster from the Podbury Flying Club ground he had acted on impulse, without thinking seriously of what he was doing and the possible consequences. He had seen the Moth taxiing out, clearly intending to take off. He knew who was in the cockpit. He heard Thompson say there was only half an hour's petrol in it, so in the first instance his immediate idea was no more than to see the direction taken by Lazor. This would give a general idea of where he might come down when he ran out of fuel. Of course, he was by no means sure that he himself would get airborne in time to pick him up; but if he could do that it might be possible to follow him a little way, even though it was doubtful if he would be able to keep contact with him for very long.

That would depend to a great extent on Lazor's ability as a pilot; that is, how clever he was at evading tactics when he realized he was being followed when he saw, should he look back, another aircraft close behind him. Obviously, if he did see he was being tracked, and took cover in the clouds, that would be the end of it, no harm having been done.

The Moth had not switched on its navigation lights, leaving Ginger to wonder if it was equipped with them. Probably not, as in the ordinary way the machine would not be used for night flying. The Auster of course had lights, but Ginger did not switch them on because this would at once make him conspicuous. It was taking a chance, but he decided to risk it.

As it turned out, having noted the direction of the Moth's take-off he had no difficulty in spotting it against the sky before it could turn. It was well below the clouds and on a course practically due south. Having once marked it, his own machine being the faster, it was a simple matter to close in on it, keeping a comfortable distance just behind and below its tail, a position where he was not likely to be seen unless Lazor thought he might be shadowed; and he could have no reason to suppose this might happen.

More than this there was nothing Ginger could do. He had no means of interfering with the Moth and would not have dared to do so if he had. In peace-time flying, anything of that sort could not have been justified and would only end in trouble for himself. The best he could do, therefore, was to watch his quarry, wait for him to land and, if outside an official aerodrome, mark the spot.

The Moth flew on. Where could Lazor be going? Had he decided on an objective, and if so where was it? Sussex now lay below, so the Channel could not be far ahead. Could he be making for France? If he did that the situation would be awkward, to say the least. Lazor probably wouldn't care what became of the Moth. It wasn't his. Once on the ground he could abandon it.

But could he reach France? That was another question. The Moth had barely enough petrol for such a trip; but it might just manage it. If Lazor looked at his fuel gauge, and unless he was a complete fool sooner or later he was bound to do that, he would hardly risk a forced landing in the sea. In his haste to get away, Ginger pondered, it might be some time before he realized that he was low in petrol.

It was at this stage of the operation that Ginger remembered his radio. If everything was in order this should make it possible for him to get in touch with Headquarters at Scotland Yard. He would not be able to speak directly to Biggles, of course, but he could get Algy or Bertie, whoever was on duty, and one of them certainly would be because Biggles had given orders to that effect, a message could be relayed over the phone to Podbury club-house, assuming Biggles had remained there. So he got busy and tried his luck. It was in. He was soon in touch with Algy, with what result we know. He reported what he was doing, his position, the course he was on, and asked that the information be passed on to Biggles at Podbury.

Taking his eyes off the Moth for a moment in order to concentrate on the radio, he nearly lost it. In fact, he did lose it for a few seconds; but after a brief period of anxiety he was able to pick it up, now on a new course. He was soon on its tail again, and lost no time in reporting to Algy the change in the situation.

What had happened? Why had Lazor suddenly changed direction? Was it because he had spotted the Auster behind him and was trying to shake it off his tail? Thinking fast, Ginger did not think that was the answer. He thought it more likely that Lazor had originally started for France, but suddenly realizing the petrol position he had changed his mind, as would be understandable, fearing he would not be able to make a landfall on the opposite side of the Channel.

Where was he making for now? If anywhere in particular? He was on the borders of Hampshire. Did he know of an aerodrome where it would be safe for him to land, or was he looking for some open country, anywhere, where it would be reasonably safe to get back on the ground, the machine being of no consequence? If that was the idea he would soon have to make up his mind. As a qualified pilot he would not be so stupid as to go on until his petrol ran out and the engine packed up on him, in which event he would have to land willy-nilly regardless of what happened to be below. Both machines were by now well inside Hampshire, with the clouds breaking and visibility improving as they travelled westwards.

It may have been the word Hampshire that rang a bell in Ginger's memory. Hampshire, he reflected. Twotrees Farm, with its big field that had been Caine's private landing ground, was in Hampshire. Lazor knew about that. Was the field his new objective? It seemed possible. In fact, probable. Why not?

Ginger thought he would soon know, for if Thompson had been right about

the Moth's petrol supply, Lazor would not be able to remain airborne for much longer. Already the needle of his petrol gauge must be nearly on the pin marked *Empty*, and causing him anxiety. In broad daylight the thought of having to make a forced landing might not worry him overmuch, but after dark, maybe over unfamiliar country, such an operation is a very different matter. There were such hazards as overhead power cables, which are almost impossible to see, to bring an aircraft to grief. Actually, Ginger was by no means sure that he would have been able to pinpoint Twotrees Farm, never having landed there.

As things worked out, Lazor must have known the landscape very well, for he took him to the farm. Ginger saw the Moth make a sharp turn and begin losing height. Looking down he was able to make out the isolated farm with its two conspicuous trees. So that's it, he thought. If Lazor could get down on the field so could he. It did not occur to him to do otherwise. What would happen when they were both on the ground could not be foreseen. That would depend on what Lazor did and where he went. Ginger resolved to see the Moth did no more flying that night, even if Lazor knew of a secret supply of petrol hidden somewhere by Caine. One thing was certain. Lazor would be on the field first. As soon as his own engine stopped he would hear the Auster and see it land. That would tell him he had been pursued. What would he do then? One thing he could be relied on not to do was take off again with practically no petrol. The probability was he would make a run for it, perhaps seek cover in the wooded country around.

Not being a fool, Ginger realized that to hunt the man in such conditions, single-handed, would be asking for trouble. He hadn't a weapon, whereas Lazor would almost certainly carry a gun; the gun he had used when he had been cornered in the dummy hay barn. Still, he resolved to follow the Moth down when it landed. There might be an emergency supply of petrol hidden in one of the farm outbuildings and Lazor might know about it. This would enable him, if nothing was done to prevent it, to refuel the Moth and take off again. He would see to it that this did not happen. Once Lazor left his machine on the ground, it would be a simple matter to put it out of action.

In the event it did not come to this. What did happen was something quite outside his calculations. Maintaining his altitude in order to have a clear view, he watched the Moth circle as if preparing to land. At least he was right in that respect. We know what happened. It overshot the field and had to go up again for another circuit. Ginger now cut his engine to reduce the chance of Lazor hearing him when, on the ground, he switched off. But again the Moth overshot the field and had to go round again. This time Ginger lost sight of the machine for a moment or two against the dark background; but he soon picked it up again as it came back.

This failure to get in did not necessarily mean that Lazor was not an efficient pilot. Ginger could appreciate the difficulty of what he was trying to do. To land in the dark on unfamiliar ground, without boundary lights for

guidance, always presents an element of risk even to a pilot accustomed to night flying, which apparently Lazor was not. Or he may have been out of practice. If Lazor's flying was at fault, Ginger thought, it was that he was going in too fast; but shortage of petrol may have been the reason why he was in such a hurry to get his wheels on the ground. Should his engine cut out at this stage he would really be in trouble.

The Moth made its third attempt to get down on the field; and Lazor must have thought he had succeeded, for he did not open up again. Of course, he may have run out of petrol, in which case he would have no choice in the matter. Again, he may have thought he had wheel brakes, only to discover too late that the obsolete machine he was flying had no such modern equipment. Be that as it may, the Moth went in, and without any advantage of a headwind to slow it down it ran on, crossed the boundary and ended up in the trees on the far side of the track with a crash that Ginger, who was now gliding, could hear above the noise made by his own machine.

Having rapped out this information on the radio, Ginger held his breath, fully expecting to see fire break out, as all too often, and so easily, happens. In this Lazor may have been lucky, although shortage of petrol may have had something to do with it. There would certainly not be enough left in the tank, should it be fractured, to spill over the hot engine.

Snatching frequent glances at the spot where the Moth had crashed, still expecting to see flames, Ginger sideslipped off some height and glided in to a safe landing. As soon as the Auster had finished its run he swung round and taxied tail up to as near the crash as he dare go. He realized of course that if Lazor had not been knocked unconscious, his arrival on the scene would be heard; but he gave no heed to that.

Strange though it may seem his concern now was for Lazor. How badly had he been hurt? This was the natural reaction of one pilot for another in danger. Anyway, Ginger was now desperately anxious to get to the Moth as quickly as possible in case Lazor should be trapped in the wreck and unable to get clear before it took fire, as still could happen: for the remains of a plane have been known to take fire long after it has crashed. When there is petrol about the slightest movement of the airframe, causing the magneto to click one final spark, can do it.

Wherefore Ginger, knowing this, as soon as he was on the ground, made flat out for the crash, which he could see in a glint of moonlight; anyway, the tail unit, which had cocked up clear of the tangle of shrubs through which the Moth had ploughed in its headlong passage. Once he paused to listen, and was not surprised to hear sounds that suggested Lazor was trying to release himself from the wreck.

Thrusting aside in his haste the broken branches that impeded his progress, he fought his way forward to the cockpit, and in so doing came within an ace of losing his life, or at least being disfigured. Vaguely in the gloom he saw a man trying to get out. 'Okay,' he said. 'Take it easy.'



The response took him completely by surprise, although it may be thought, the man being what he was, there was no reason why it should. Lazor snarled like a wildcat cornered by dogs. Ginger saw his arm go up, and with it the flash of steel. Instinctively he ducked, at the same time, stepping back, and the blade of Lazor's razor missed his face by inches. Unfortunately, or perhaps fortunately, in stepping back he caught his heel in a broken branch and went over backwards. He was up in a flash, but by that time Lazor was scrambling out of the cockpit on the opposite side.

Livid with anger Ginger shouted: 'You dirty swine,' and started after him.

What with the fuselage lying between them, and broken branches lying at all angles, this was not easy, and by the time he had got round the plane by the front end Lazor had disappeared. A crashing in the undergrowth told him which way he had gone, and he started after him; but a pistol shot, and a bullet ripping through the twigs close by, brought him to a halt with a realization of the folly of what he was doing. This was no place to tackle an armed man. Indeed, it was practically suicidal.

He stood still for a minute, thinking, with the sounds of Lazor's departure getting farther away; for the situation called for serious thought. Clearly, Lazor must have recognized him — he may have seen him through the window of Thompson's office at Podbury — and hearing the Auster land would guess he had been followed.

What to do Ginger did not know. What *could* he do? From time to time he could still hear the sounds of Lazor's progress through the wood. To try to follow him, apart from the risk of being shot, was out of the question. He thought Lazor would not stay in the wood longer than was necessary. It seemed more likely that if he knew about the track leading to the farm, he would try to make his way to it. The going would be easier. He might even try to get to the plane that had followed him, which he must realize by now had landed in the field, and finding it unguarded, make off in it.

Ginger decided that was one thing that must not be allowed to happen, so turning about he forced his way to the track to prevent it. He reckoned that if Lazor came back up the track he would see him and be able to stop him. If he tried to get to the field through the wood he would hear him, for to move without a sound through a wood at night is not possible.

By no means happy at the way things were going, although he could not see how he could have done other than he had, with some little difficulty he managed to reach the track and again stood still to listen. One thing was evident. Lazor may have been shaken in the crash, but obviously he had not been seriously hurt. He was on his feet, and could be expected to fight his way out of the position in which he now found himself. Ginger did not know what to do next.

## CHAPTER 15

### HOT WORK IN COLD BLOOD

Had Ginger known that Biggles had followed him in one of the club Aiglets, it would have been an entirely different matter. But of course he did not know, and had no reason even to contemplate such a possibility. As far as he was concerned Biggles was still where he had left him; at the Podbury clubhouse with Thompson. The best Ginger could hope for was that Algy had got word to Biggles that Lazor was down at Twotrees Farm, in which case he might start for the place in Thompson's car. But even so, it would take some time for him to get to the farm; allow ample time for Lazor to get clear away. Meantime he would be alone to act on his own initiative, a state of affairs that filled him with misgivings. He realized how much he normally relied on Biggles' leadership. It might be thought he would have remembered there were other aircraft at Podbury, so there was a possibility of Biggles borrowing one of them. The fact remains that no such thought occurred to him, which perhaps in his state of mind was understandable.

But he felt he had to do something. He couldn't just stand there waiting for something to happen. Having given the situation some thought, what he did was to move quietly down the track, pausing at frequent intervals to listen for a sound that would at least give him a rough idea of Lazor's whereabouts. He felt sure that Lazor would not be able to move without a certain amount of noise. If he came up the track, in a silence that was brittle with suspense he would hear him coming. The air was still. An owl hooted. Why, he wondered irritably, did owls always have to hoot in moments of nervous tension? Once, from the far distance, came the whistle of a train. Walking with extreme caution Ginger advanced slowly down the track.

Presently, during a pause, there came another sound; one that puzzled him not a little. Footsteps. Heavy footsteps. Coming towards him up the hill. Would Lazor walk with such confidence? Surely not, thought Ginger. Yet who else could it be? Who else would be on the way to the farm at such an hour of night? As far as he knew the track led to nowhere else. He stepped back close against the bank to watch for the walker to appear.

Subconsciously he became aware of the drone of a light aircraft somewhere in the sky, but so taken up was he with what was happening closer at hand that he paid no attention to it. After all, it was a common enough sound. Not for a moment did the thought occur to him that it might be Biggles.

Then, suddenly, came shock, loud and devastating, to tighten his muscles like banjo strings. It started with a shout, sharp and preemptory, harsh with authority. It was followed instantly by a shot that cracked through the silence like a whiplash. Hard on it came a curious strangled cry. Then another shot,

this time from a heavier weapon. Then another. With it was a scream. Silence returned, sullen and menacing.

Ginger stood rigid, as if frozen, his heart hammering against his ribs with the sudden shock of it all. What did this mean? What had happened? He fought to steady his racing brain in order to think clearly; to make sense of it. What could have happened? Whatever it might be, he was not involved; so much was certain. The shots. A pistol and a gun — a sporting gun, he thought. Those were what the reports had sounded like. He was sure two different weapons had been used. That could only mean two persons were there. One could be, and probably was, he reasoned, Lazor. He had a pistol. The first shot had been a pistol shot. He had fired at someone. Who? Why? Who had fired the gun? Two shots. Evidently a double-barrelled shotgun. And the cries. What did they mean? Could they mean someone had been hit? It seemed the only explanation.

Having got his breath Ginger moved forward slowly, a step at a time, to investigate. His common sense told him it was crazy; but prudence had deserted him. Curiosity had defeated it. With high banks and trees on both sides of the track he could not see much. Once in a while a little moonlight filtered through the broken clouds to make the track a little less dark, but that was all that could be said for the visibility.

It was during one of these brief flashes that he saw something lying on the track a little way in front of him. At first he took it to be a sack. A few more paces and it looked more like the shape of a body. Lazor? No. The figure was too bulky. With his nerves at full stretch, expecting at every step he took to hear another pistol shot when he would be the target, keeping tight against the ferny bank he crept forward. Soon there was no longer any doubt. It was a body. It lay still: horribly still. Dry-lipped, Ginger crouched against the bank to listen for the slightest sound. There was none. Nothing moved. The silence was awful. He could feel death in the air.

What to do? Again every nerve in his body urged him to retire; but simple humanity declared he could not do that, leaving the body lying where it was, unattended. Crouching, on tiptoe, ready to jump at the merest sound, he crept up to the body. It was a man. Dead or unconscious? He didn't know which. Realizing he was a sitting target he did not feel inclined to linger while he examined the body for a wound. He saw the face of an elderly man. Bearded. He did not know him; he had never seen him before. His clothes were green corduroy, a sort of uniform with brass buttons, such as is sometimes worn by an estate gamekeeper. A gamebag slung from a shoulder gave support to this surmise, as did a double-barrelled twelve-bore sporting gun lying near.

A gamekeeper, thought Ginger swiftly. That would account for him being out at night. To watch for poachers. Come to think of it, Ginger's brain raced on, he and Biggles had on a previous occasion seen the man on the track, the man with a lurcher dog, whom Biggles had suspected might be a poacher. Had the gamekeeper been out hoping to catch him on the job, with a pheasant

in his pocket? It seemed not unlikely.

Ginger picked up the gun and went back to the bank. There he 'broke' it. Two spent cartridges were ejected. This answered one question. The gamekeeper had fired the gun. Assuming this to be the correct interpretation, why had he been shot? Ginger hadn't much doubt about that. Poachers do not carry pistols. True, a poacher might carry a light rifle, a .22 for instance, but the report he had heard did not sound like the crisp crack of such a weapon. It had sounded heavier. Anyway, a rifle firing a single bullet was not the sort of tool a poacher would choose to work with on a dark night. If he used a firearm it would more likely be a .410, firing a spread of shot.

Lazor had a pistol. He, Ginger decided, had shot the keeper. Why? Was it a case of mistaken identity? That seemed the most likely answer.

Ginger worked it out like this. Lazor had reached the track. The gamekeeper, walking up the track looking for the poacher, had seen something, or heard a sound that made him suspicious. He had challenged it. That, Ginger thought, was the first cry he had heard. Lazor, knowing that Ginger was trailing him, without being able to see clearly in the dark, had fired, thinking he was the challenger. The bullet had struck the keeper. Before he fell the keeper had fired back, possibly at the flash of the pistol. He had fired both barrels of his gun. There had been another cry. What was that? Had some of the pellets struck Lazor? It might well have happened. Most gamekeepers, from long practice, are quick, sure shots.

What to do now Ginger did not know. He thought the keeper was dead; he looked dead; but he wasn't sure; and he was in no case to make a close examination. He had seen no wound, no blood. The man might not be beyond help; but where could help be found at such a place in the middle of the night? As far as he knew the only house within miles was the farm, and there was no one there. At all events, there had been no light showing at a window when he had landed.

Ginger, leaning back against the steep, mossy bank, was painfully aware that Lazor might be standing within yards of him, a gun in his hand. It is not surprising, therefore, that he found it hard to think clearly; to know what to do for the best. He felt he couldn't leave the wretched man lying on the road to be run over by the first vehicle that came along: not that a vehicle was likely: but it was a possibility. If the man wasn't quite dead that would finish him off. And there was the driver of the vehicle to consider. Unprepared for such an obstacle he might be overturned. The matter was urgent. But to get himself shot would not improve matters. Where was Lazor? Was he still there or had he gone? There was no way of finding out. Naturally, Ginger did not feel like taking a step that might be suicidal.

He felt sure that Lazor could not be far away. He had heard no sound. He was probably watching; perhaps from the bushes that fringed the wood on the far side of the track. So reasoned Ginger, who remained where he was, a prey to doubt and anxiety.

After a little while an idea did occur to him. He could see no reason why, if he was prepared to take a risk, he should not be in a position to do something. He had the twelve-bore. But what was the use of that? It was not loaded. With cartridges it would be a very different matter. Firing a spread of pellets it would be a more effective weapon than a pistol firing a single bullet. It was unlikely that the keeper would come out with only two cartridges on him. There would be others in one of his pockets.

Feeling on the ground Ginger picked up a stone and threw it into the wood on the far side of the track hoping it would cause Lazor to move and so reveal himself —should he be there. The stone rattled down through the branches. Nothing happened. After the stone had fallen there was not a sound. Anywhere. The silence seemed like a blanket dropping from the sky.

Ginger drew a deep breath. This was no use. He couldn't stand any more of this dreadful suspense. He would have to risk more direct action. Dry-lipped with tension he crept across the track to the body still lying there and felt in one of the jacket pockets. Nothing. He tried the other. His groping fingers closed on what he sought. Cartridges. His eyes all the time on the far bank, with two in his hand he backed swiftly to his original position. No sound. He picked up the gun, opened the breach and slipped in the two cartridges. Closing it, the spring, unavoidably, made a sharp click, which brought his heart into his mouth, as the saying is. Nothing happened. He wiped sweat from his forehead with his sleeve. With the cold barrels in his hands he felt better.

Again he hesitated. What to do next? In all his experience of nasty situations he had never found himself in a more awkward one than this. His first thought was to blaze into the bushes opposite. That should cause Lazor to move if he was there. Then he had second thoughts. What if he killed him? That might well get him into serious trouble. He would not be able, with truth, to claim that he had fired only in self-defence.

He decided his next step should be to move the man lying on the track. That was important. It would be a longer operation that fetching the cartridges. Moreover, he would have to put down the gun to do it. He would need both hands to move such a heavy body. He stared at the bushes on the far side of the road, gun at the ready, fingers round the triggers. The bushes, black and silent, told him nothing. He felt he couldn't stand the strain much longer. Something would have to be done, and soon.

In the end he was left with no choice, for at this stage there came a development of a sort he least expected. It was the sound of a car coming up the hill at high speed. As yet it was some distance away, but already he could see its headlights flickering on the tops of the trees.

For a breathless moment he did nothing, unable to imagine who it could be. He hoped the car would stop, or turn back; otherwise, inevitably, it would crash over the body lying in the road. That would certainly finish off the keeper if he was not already dead, and in all probability overturn the car,

killing the driver.

With the lights now rounding the next corner he hesitated no longer. Resting the gun against the bank he dashed out on to the track regardless, and seizing the keeper by the collar of his jacket, dragged him, not without difficulty, to as close to the bank as he could get him. But even here, he thought, it might not be safe. There was no verge. Only the bank flush with the track. If the driver of the car held to the crown of the track all might be well. But would he? The track was narrow. He might run with one wheel in the gutter should he fail to get properly straightened out after taking the corner at the speed he was travelling.

Why does the fool have to travel at such a rate, was Ginger's thought as, furious at such inconsiderate driving, he snatched out his handkerchief and ran out into the road, waving his arms above his head in a reckless effort to stop the car in time. This might have cost him his life had not the driver been on the alert and in full control of his car which, with a grinding scream of brakes, came to a skidding stop within a yard of him, causing him to make a desperate leap to one side to save himself from being knocked down.

The driver sprang out with an alacrity that indicated his anger, perhaps justifiable. 'You fool! What the devil do you think you're doing?' he rasped.

Ginger recognized Bertie's voice. In his astonishment he could only stammer: 'You — what are *you* doing here?' Then he remembered something. Lazor. 'Don't stand here. Lazor's close with a gun. Get behind the car and keep your head down.' So saying he ducked round the car to put it between himself and the danger spot.

Bertie, sensing the urgency from Ginger's voice, lost no time in following. Naturally, he was equally surprised to see Ginger, and he voiced his amazement. 'So it's you! Sorry, laddie, but how was I to know? What the deuce are you doing? What's going on? What's this about Lazor? I had orders to come to the farm hot-foot, and believe me, chaps. I haven't wasted any time getting here. Where's Biggles?'

Ginger groped for words. 'Biggles! How should I know?'

'Haven't you seen him?'

'No. Why should I?'

'He's here somewhere, or he should be.'

'Why should he?'

'He rang Algy to say he was on his way here in one of the Podbury Aiglets and wanted me to come along in case he needed an extra hand. Here I am.'

Ginger began to see daylight. 'So that's it.'

'What's this about Lazor?' 'He's here on the run with a gun.'

'But I understood he'd crashed. You said so.'

'So he did, but he was lucky and got away with it. He had a swipe at me with his razor when I went to help him. He came this way.'

'The stinking polecat.'

'He's already shot one man, thinking, I can only suppose, it was me. There

he is.' Ginger indicated the prone body with a jerk of his thumb. 'That's why I stopped you as I did. I was afraid you might run over him.'

Naturally, this conversation had been carried on in quick, short sentences, without wasting words.

'I'm mighty glad to see you,' went on Ginger. 'It was no joke standing here with Lazor, as I had reason to believe, within yards of me, with a gun — and me without a weapon until a moment ago when I collected the twelve-bore this chap was carrying.'

'I think we'd better try to find Biggles,' Bertie said. 'It's time he took charge of this frolic.'

'But what are we going to do about *him*?' Again Ginger indicated the man lying in the gutter where he had dropped him.

'Is he dead?'

'I don't know. He looks dead, but I wouldn't be sure.'

'What do you suggest we do?'

'I don't know. Obviously we can't leave him lying here. I'll tell you what. Let's make a dash for the farm to see if Biggles is on the field. Let him decide what's best to be done. There's a phone in the farmhouse. It might be possible to get hold of the police or an ambulance. This unfortunate chap shouldn't take any harm for a few minutes.'

'Fair enough.'

'Mind how you go. Keep low. Don't forget Lazor's got a gun and he'll be ready to use it. The sooner Biggles knows about that the better.' Ginger picked up the twelve-bore. He didn't unload it but slipped on the safety catch.

'What are you going to do with that blunderbuss?' Bertie wanted to know.

'Bring it with me. I may need it. I'm certainly not going to leave it here for Lazor to snatch. He's got enough weapons already.'

'Be careful what you're doing with it in the car,' Bertie warned, a trifle anxiously.

'Don't worry. I shan't shoot you,' promised Ginger.

'I hope you're right, dear boy,' concluded Bertie.

There were a few anxious seconds as they piled into the car in full view of the danger area; but nothing happened.

The starter whirled. Bertie put his foot down and the car raced on up the hill. Once clear Ginger drew a deep breath of relief as he relaxed. He had been under considerable strain for some time.

## CHAPTER 16

### MORE QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

When they arrived at the top end of the track Ginger and Bertie found Biggles pacing up and down between the Aiglet and the Auster. Recognizing them he stopped, and greeted them with a hint of sarcasm that revealed his impatience. 'I'm glad to see someone is doing some work besides me.'

'I like that!' protested Ginger. 'What do you think I've been doing? Having a nap in the bracken? Had you been through what I've just had, your hair would be white.'

'Dash it all, old boy, I came here like a bomb as soon as I got your message,' put in Bertie.

'Sorry, but stuck here without a clue as to what's happening I'm all on edge,' Biggles said contritely.

'Why are you stuck here, anyway?' Ginger asked.

'I brought Thompson with me. He's gone up to the house to see if there's anything going on there,' explained Biggles. 'That left me here on my own to keep an eye on the machines. What's your news? Have you seen anything of Lazor?'

Ginger answered, grimly. 'I saw enough of that son of a jackal for him to make a swipe at me with his razor when I went to help him out of the mess he'd made of Thompson's Moth. Then he bolted into the wood. I went after him and nearly ran into a bullet coming the other way. I haven't seen him since, but I found signs of where he'd been busy.'

'Such as?'

'He shot a man on the road a little way below here.'

'Shot a man? What man?'

'A stranger to me. A gamekeeper, I think. I heard him walking up the track. There were shots. I can only conclude Lazor mistook him for me. The keeper fired back at whoever shot him.'

'Where's this man now?'

'Lying beside the track.'

'Why leave him there?'

'What else could I do, with Lazor skulking in the bushes panting to have a crack at me? Have a heart. It was no joke, believe you me, standing there in the dark expecting every second that Lazor would jump on me with his cursed razor.'

'Is this keeper badly hurt?'

'I think he's dead. He looked dead.'

'Great grief!'

'I'll admit I didn't examine the body for wounds, so I couldn't be sure. It wasn't the time or place for that. It took me all my time to drag him clear



before Bertie came up the hill as if he was trying to break the sound barrier. He told me you were here, which was something I didn't know, and we decided the first thing to do was let you know how things stood. We thought maybe you could use the phone at the farm to call an ambulance.'

'Unfortunately it won't work.'

'Why not?'

'Because Lazor, the ham-fisted twit, took the wires with him when he tried to put the Moth on the carpet. Luck was with him. Had he hit the pole—'

'Pity he didn't.'

'We shall have to do something about this keeper chap. Bertie, could you find your way to Repford hospital — you know, the place where Caine went?'

'I don't see why not.'

'Then you'd better take him there.'

'I'd have done that right away had I known the phone was out of action.'

'You'd better take Ginger with you — you might have a job to get the fellow into your car single-handed. He needn't go all the way. When you've got the man on board he can come back here to me and tell me more about this business.'

'You realize Lazor is on the prowl. He can't be far away,' put in Ginger.

'I can't help that. Let's do one thing at a time. We'll deal with Lazor when we've got things sorted out. I can't leave here or I'd go myself: but I told Thompson I'd wait here in case he ran into trouble. He doesn't know anything about Lazor. He might bump into him. Anyhow, I've got his machine; one of the club Aiglets. We can't just abandon him.'

Ginger shrugged. 'Okay, if that's how you want it. I've got the keeper's gun. That track is about as healthy as a jungle path with a man-eater on the rampage.'

Biggles turned to Bertie. 'Listen. This is the drill. Collect this body and press on to the hospital. Having done that, make for the police station and report what's happened, or they'll be sore with us. They've a right to know. Besides, we may need help. If they feel like rounding up Lazor themselves they're welcome to the job. Having done that, come back here as fast as you can. Got that?'

'Absolutely, old boy. No trouble at all.'

'Good. Then get on with it. Ginger, when you've got the body in the car hoof it back here.'

'I shall not linger to pick flowers on the way, you can bet your sweet life on that,' rejoined Ginger succinctly. 'That track has already put years on me.'

'All right, then. Push off, you two.'

Ginger went to the car with Bertie, who, having reversed it, set off down the track, again leaving Biggles alone.

Biggles waited until the sound of the car had faded and then turned his attention to the house. He was puzzled. What could Thompson be doing? He had been away a long time, longer, he thought, than was necessary for him

simply to check if there was anyone there. He was beginning to feel uneasy. He could only hope Thompson hadn't run into trouble; but in that case, he told himself, surely he would have heard some sound of it. He half regretted having sent him, and would not have done so had he known that Lazor was running wild, apparently having escaped injury in the crash. As a matter of detail, at the back of his mind he had thought it not unlikely that a constable had been left on duty at the house pending investigation of the bloodstains. But this, evidently, was not so, or Thompson would have returned at once to report it.

Biggles' difficulty now was this. His very instinct was to go to the house to make sure nothing had happened to Thompson. Having sent him there he felt responsible for his safety. But with Lazor free, unhurt, and probably close, he dare not leave the two serviceable aircraft for fear he made off in one of them. Given a chance, this would be an easy way out for him. Once in the air he could go anywhere. He might even leave the country.

So Biggles could only stand there, torn by doubts although with eyes and ears alert, for he did not lose sight of the fact that he himself was in some danger. Conditions were ideal for Lazor to make a stealthy approach to within close range and take a shot at him, either out of spite, or with the idea of securing one of the aircraft.

For this reason he stood close to the dark background provided by the fuselage of the Auster. He dare not ease his anxiety with a cigarette, for this would mean striking a light, which would betray his presence and position: as would the glowing end of a cigarette. He knew only too well how far even a spark can be seen on a dark night. So he could only await Ginger's return with all the patience he could muster. With two of them there the present difficulty could be overcome.

How long Biggles waited in these uncertain conditions he did not know. He had not checked the actual time; but it must have been a long while even taking into account that standing alone in the dead of night waiting for something to happen can seem an eternity. What on earth could Ginger be doing, he thought, over and over again. The same with Thompson. Why hadn't he come back? What reason could he have found to keep him so long at the house?

It may be that he did not fully appreciate the nervous character of the task Ginger had been set to do, following closely on the strain of what had already happened. He estimated it would only take the car a matter of a few minutes to reach the dead or unconscious gamekeeper. Another minute to get him into the car. After that he would simply have to run back up the hill. That is what Biggles, understandably, supposed. He imagined the sinister state of the track would serve to expedite Ginger's return.

Actually, this might have been sound reasoning, but there was cause for Ginger's delayed return, a cause he certainly could not have imagined.

The car had gone down the hill at a safe speed, Bertie at the wheel and

Ginger sitting beside him holding the twelve-bore gun in the manner of the 'scatter gun' escort on the box of a stage-coach, as depicted on some Western films. Bertie brought the car to a stop at the place where the body had been left. Ginger looked but couldn't see it. 'We've come too far,' he said.

'I don't think so,' Bertie answered. 'I'm sure this is the place.'

'It couldn't have been.'

'Why not?'

'Because the man isn't here.'

'He must be,' stated Bertie definitely. 'I know I'm right. I can see my skid marks on the track when I stopped on the way up.'

For a moment Ginger did not answer. He didn't know what to say. When the truth of Bertie's argument did penetrate, all he could say was: 'Well, he isn't here. We must have come past him. Go back a bit.' It seemed too incredible that the body could have disappeared. That didn't make sense. How *could* it have disappeared? Who would move it?

Bertie obediently went into reverse for twenty or thirty yards, with Ginger leaning out looking at the gutter. 'It wasn't as far up the hill as this, I'm quite sure,' Bertie stated, again coming to a halt.

'What on earth... he can't have gone,' declared Ginger in a dazed voice. 'The place must be farther on. Go on for a bit.'

Bertie took his foot off the brake and allowed the car to crawl forward. When it had covered about a hundred yards in this manner he again put his foot on the brake. 'It wasn't as far down the hill as this,' he argued. 'We're nearly at the corner.'

'This beats me,' muttered Ginger. 'All I can say is, it *must* have gone.'

Bertie replied with a short laugh. 'That's a lark. Now what do we do? Go back and tell Biggles the corpse has walked out on us? He'll think we're off our rockers.'

Ginger did not answer that question. 'Somebody must have come along and picked him up,' he decided.

'Who? Picked him up — how? Under his arm? Who would come here at this hour? No. Don't give me that.'

'Could Lazor have moved him?'

'Not unless he's completely round the twist. A man who kills somebody doesn't come back.' Ginger thought hard. 'The body's gone — let's face it,' he said. 'If nobody has moved it then obviously it must have moved itself.'

'What you're saying is, the chap couldn't have been dead after all.'

'If he's moved off on his own account it doesn't need a wizard to work out that he couldn't have been dead,' averred Ginger pithily. 'Go on a bit. He can't have got far.'

Bertie allowed the car to move forward again. It had covered perhaps a quarter of a mile when Ginger cried: 'Look out! What's that on the road in front?'

'Looks like an old sack.'

‘It’s alive. It’s moving.’

As the car drew close, the truth was revealed when a human face was turned towards them to show white in the headlights.

‘It’s him,’ shouted Ginger. ‘Stop!’

Bertie stopped. Ginger sprang out. He ran to a kneeling figure. ‘Let’s give you a hand,’ he said. ‘Come on. In the car.’

The man said only two words. ‘I’m shot,’ he gasped.

‘Who shot you?’

The man did not answer. He had collapsed. Ginger, after one close look at his face, snapped: ‘Help me, Bertie.’

Bertie went to Ginger’s assistance, and together — for a heavy helpless man is not an easy thing to load — they managed to get the unconscious keeper on board.

‘You press on,’ Ginger told Bertie crisply. ‘Get him to the hospital. I’ll go back and tell Biggles what’s happened.’

‘Okay.’

‘I’ll keep this.’ Ginger collected the gun.

‘See you later,’ Bertie said, and continued on down the track.

Ginger watched him out of sight; then, with the gun held ready for action as he remembered Lazor, he set off up the hill.

It will now be understood why, by the time he got back to Biggles, his mission had taken longer, much longer, than had been anticipated.

‘What the devil have you been doing all this time?’ demanded Biggles irritably.

‘He’s alive,’ panted Ginger, who had been running.

‘Who’s alive? Talk sense.’

‘The man I thought was dead. When we got to the place where we’d left him he wasn’t there. After hunting high and low we eventually found him crawling down the track.’

‘Was he able to tell you what had happened?’

‘No. He simply said “I’m shot.” Then he passed out. Bertie is taking him on to the hospital.’

‘See anything of Lazor?’

‘Not a sign. Where’s Thompson?’

‘He hasn’t come back from the farm. I was waiting for you to mount guard over the planes, so that I could go up to see what has become of him. I don’t think he can be in trouble, or I’d have heard something. You stand fast here while—’ Biggles broke off, staring in the direction of the house. ‘What was that?’

‘Sounded like somebody hammering.’

‘Wait here,’ ordered Biggles, and went off at a run.

## CHAPTER 17

### HOW IT ALL ENDED

The sound which Ginger had described as hammering became louder as Biggles drew near the house. When he got to the door he found it shut and locked. He banged on it with his fist, shouting: 'Thompson! Are you in there?'

A voice inside uttered an inarticulate cry.

Biggles did not hesitate. He charged the door, full weight on his shoulder. It flew open and he burst in, nearly to fall over Thompson who was on his knees just inside the hall. The lamp was alight. The face that looked up was streaked with blood.

'What's happened?' asked Biggles tersely.

'Lazor was here.'

'Where is he now?'

'He must have gone, locking the door so I couldn't get out.'

'Why didn't you shout?'

'He didn't give me a chance. I found the door open. I went in. He was standing behind it. He must have heard me coming. Before I could do anything he'd coshed me — knocked me out flat. I only came round a minute or two ago. Finding I couldn't get out, all I could do was hammer on the door hoping you'd hear me. Lazor must have been collecting some stuff when I disturbed him. There was a bag on the table. I don't know what was in it. That's gone, too, I see. Sorry about this.'

'You've nothing to be sorry about except yourself,' returned Biggles. 'How badly are you hurt? Let's have a look at your head.' He examined the wound. 'Not too bad, I think. All the same, we'll get you to hospital where you can be patched up properly. Why do you suppose Lazor went for you?'

'I don't know. I can only imagine he thought I was someone else; you, perhaps.'

'That's twice tonight he's hit the wrong man,' Biggles said grimly. 'But never mind about him. Come on, let's get you down to the machines. I've left someone in charge. Bertie is away in his car at the moment, but he should soon be back. There's no point in staying here. If you can walk I'll lend you a hand.'

They left the house and walked slowly, with Thompson leaning on Biggles' shoulder, to where Ginger was standing. He was told what had happened. He wondered how Lazor had got past him on the track, but perceived it would not be difficult in the dark. He might not have used the track.

'Sit down while you're waiting,' Biggles told Thompson.

Ginger fetched the seat cushion from the Aiglet's cockpit, and Thompson was made as comfortable as possible with his back resting against an

undercarriage wheel.

They had just finished this, and Biggles was lighting a cigarette, when from some distance down the hill there came the sound of a car approaching at high speed.

‘That must be Bertie coming now,’ Biggles said.

‘That doesn’t sound like Bertie’s car to me,’ observed Ginger. ‘Sounds more like two cars. Yes, you can see two pairs of headlights on the tops of the tallest trees.’

As the words left his lips there came a scream of brakes followed instantly by an ominous crash. The lights disappeared.

‘Holy smoke!’ exclaimed Biggles. ‘That was a beauty for somebody. Now what, I wonder? This place gets more like a battlefield every minute. I’d better go to see what’s happened. Ginger, you stay here with Thompson. Watch out for Lazor. This may be more of his dirty work.’ So saying, he went off down the track at a run.

He soon came to the scene of the accident. As Ginger had thought, two cars were involved. The rear one had apparently run into the back of the leading one. Four men were there. One was lying in the road. Bertie was standing by him. The others were two police officers. Biggles recognized one as the sergeant he had seen previously at the farmhouse. He was making gestures and babbling incoherently over and over again: ‘It was his own fault. He ran straight into me. I couldn’t do anything about it. Not a thing. He ran smack into—’

‘All right, officer,’ cut in Biggles. ‘You’ve told us. You needn’t keep telling us. Take it easy. Who did you knock down?’

‘It’s Lazor,’ informed Bertie.

‘The devil it is!’ exclaimed Biggles. Somehow he wasn’t expecting this.

‘Looks as if he’s had it this time,’ Bertie said without emotion.

‘How did it happen?’ asked Biggles.

The police sergeant answered. ‘He jumped out of the bushes and came stumbling down the road like he was drunk, waving his arms. I hadn’t a chance. I couldn’t stop. I hit him fair and square. I—’

Biggles interrupted, turning to Bertie. ‘How much did you see of this?’

‘Not much, old boy. I was taking the keeper chap to hospital as you ordered when I saw a policeman on a bike. I stopped and told him to let his boss know something was going on at the farm. He said he’d do that right away; so that saved me the trouble. I went on to the hospital. The keeper was still unconscious, so I didn’t wait. I headed back here flat out. At the bottom of the hill I overtook a car in front of me. I couldn’t pass so I sat on its tail. Suddenly, without warning, the car in front jammed on its brakes and I ran into it. When I got out I saw I’d been following a police car. It had knocked somebody down. That’s all.’

‘Are you hurt?’

‘No. But my headlights took a crack.’

The policeman, who had been examining the body, came in again. 'He's dead all right. I hadn't a hope of stopping. I can't understand it. He must have been tight. I could swear he deliberately charged into me. It was his own fault.'

The other officer confirmed this. 'I'd say he was drunk. Must have been blind drunk the way he acted.'

'You'd better get him to a doctor, or the hospital,' advised Biggles. 'Is your car all right?'

'As far as I know. I'll soon see.'

Nothing more was said. There was no argument. The car started first time. The headlights had gone, but the sidelights were working. Between them Lazor was lifted in, Biggles taking the legs. Afterwards he looked at his hands. There was blood on them. 'Hello, what's all this?' he muttered. He looked at the sergeant. 'I think I can tell you something. I've a notion Lazor had been wounded before you knocked him down. Maybe that was why he acted as he did. He may have been trying to stop you.'

'Wounded? How? Did you shoot at him?'

'No, but the man he shot, a gamekeeper, fired at him with his gun. We heard the shots. But we'd better not stand here talking. You get along with the body.'

The car went off. It had to go to the top of the hill to turn. When it came back it went past without stopping, Bertie having moved his car tight against the bank to give it room. He now went up the hill with Biggles standing on the running board. So they rejoined Ginger who was still guarding the aircraft. Biggles told him briefly what had happened.

'What a night!' answered Ginger. 'What's the drill now?'

'I think it's time we knocked off and got some sleep. There's nothing more we can do here except get Thompson to the hospital. Then we'll go home.'

'What about these machines?'

'They can stand where they are for the time being. No one is likely to interfere with them. We'll come back tomorrow in daylight when we shall be able to see better what we're doing. Then we'll take them back to where they live.'

'That sounds a good idea to me,' Bertie said. 'I'm dead on my feet.' He went to his car and started the engine.

There is not much more to be said; but a few details may need tidying up. Lazor, the Sheikh, was dead. If he wasn't killed on the spot by the police car he was dead on arrival at the hospital. It was likely that he would have died anyway, for the post mortem examination revealed that he had severe gunshot wounds in the legs and stomach and had lost a lot of blood. So the gamekeeper had evidently been on the mark when he had emptied his gun at his unseen assailant. Why Lazor had gone to the farm after being shot will never be known, but a reasonable theory would be that, knowing he wouldn't

be able to get far, he had gone to the empty farmhouse, the only shelter within miles, either as a hide-out where he could dress his wounds or, not knowing he had put the telephone out of action, to phone for medical help.

As for the gamekeeper who had unwittingly played such a vital part in the affair, far from dying he had been able to leave hospital after treatment for shock. It turned out he had been lucky. By one of those extraordinary chances which, as every soldier who has been in action knows can occur, his life had been saved by a metal object. In this case one of the brass buttons on his jacket. Lazor's bullet — there is no doubt as to who had fired the shot — had struck, and had been deflected by, the button on his breast pocket. But even so it had struck with enough force to knock him down; for a bullet, even if it does not penetrate, strikes like a blow from a sledgehammer.

His own version of the shooting, in a statement he made later, was that he did not deliberately fire the gun. He had no recollection of doing it. He heard a sudden movement in the bushes beside the road, and thinking it was the man he was looking for, the poacher, had ordered him to come out, at the same time pointing the gun in that direction in case he was attacked. The poacher was known to be a violent character. The gun was loaded and on full cock. He remembered seeing a flash and feeling a blow. What happened after that he did not know. He did not deny that his gun had been fired, so he could only conclude that when Lazor's bullet had struck him, his fingers had tightened convulsively on the trigger, causing it to go off. It might well have happened this way.

That was all he knew. When he came round he found himself lying in the road. His gun had gone. Supposing he had little chance of being found in the lonely lane in the middle of the night, he had started to crawl home. His story, which tallied with all the evidence, was accepted.

Thompson, who had suffered only a superficial head wound, was kept one night at the hospital. In the morning he phoned Biggles at Scotland Yard. Biggles, who had already reported the events of the previous day to his chief, Air Commodore Raymond (at the same time handing over the stolen pearls), taking Ginger with him went down to meet him at the farm. Ginger went along to collect the police Auster. Biggles flew Thompson, who was still a bit shaky, back to Podbury, and was later picked up from there by Bertie in an official car.

All this time, of course, Caine was still in hospital, but he was informed of what had happened. His relief, when he heard that his razor-wielding associate was dead, was probably genuine.

There was some discussion at Headquarters about what action should be taken with him and Thompson, for they had both been 'sailing near the wind', to use a common expression. At the end nothing was done. It was felt they had both had a lesson they were not likely to forget, and with Lazor out of their lives they would be more careful in the future. Lazor was undoubtedly the villain in the case and no good purpose would be served by taking them to



court. That was Biggles' view. As he pointed out, Caine, who would carry the scar of Lazor's 'mark' on his face for the rest of his life, had been punished enough. Neither was a professional criminal, although under Lazor's influence that is what they might have become. On the whole they may have been lucky.

So ended a case, perhaps less spectacular than some in the Air Police records, that had started as a more or less routine exercise, but had finished in such dramatic circumstances — Biggles called it a sordid mess — at Twotrees Farm.

THE END